

THE GENERAL'S RING



BY SELMA LAGERLÖF

JERUSALEM, A Novel

GIRL FROM THE MARSH CROFT

MIRACLES OF ANTICHRIST

THE HOLY CITY, *Jerusalem II*

MÅRBACKA

CHARLOTTE LÖWENSKÖLD

THE GENERAL'S RING

THE TALE OF A MANOR

QUEENS OF KUNGAHALLA

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

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—“Who's WHO”

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THE GENERAL'S RING

BY

SELMA LAGERLÖF



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I

I KNOW that in former days there were plenty of people who knew not the meaning of the word "fear." I have heard of folk who loved to skate on the thinnest of ice, of others who knew no greater joy than to drive unbroken horses. There have, indeed, been even a few who would play cards with Colour-Sergeant Ahlegard, although he had every trick at his fingers' ends and always managed to win. Then there are intrepid souls who have had the courage to start travelling on a Friday and to sit down thirteen to table.

But I wonder whether any even of such would have had courage to wear the fearsome ring that had belonged to old General Löwensköld of Hedeby.

It was this same old General who had won fame, property, and a title for the

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Löwenskölds; and so long as there was one of the family living at Hedeby, his portrait hung in the big upper drawing-room, between the windows. It was a large picture, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. On glancing at it casually, you might have mistaken it for Charles the Twelfth himself, standing there firmly planted on the tessellated floor, in his blue coat, chamois leather gloves, and enormous jack boots. But, on a closer glance, you realized that it was an entirely different person.

A broad, rough peasant face rose above the coat collar. The man looked born to follow the plough all the days of his life; but, in spite of his plainness, he gave the impression of being a wise, reliable, even great, man. Had he been born in these days, he would, at least, have been on a jury, or the chairman of a Municipal Council; but living, as he did, in the reign of the great hero king, he went out and fought as a poor soldier and returned as the rich General Löwen-sköld, receiving as the reward of the

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Crown for all his service the estate, of Hedeby, in the parish of Bro.

As a matter of fact, the longer you looked at the picture, the more reconciled to it you became. You seemed to realise that it was men such as this who had, under the leadership of King Charles the Twelfth, ploughed the furrow between Poland and Russia. His army had not been composed wholly of adventurers and courtiers ; there had been simple, earnest men, such as the one in this picture, who had loved him, and found him a King worth living and dying for.

While studying the picture, there was generally one of the family at hand to point out that not vanity alone had prompted the General to remove the glove from his left hand, so as to display the great signet ring which he wore on his forefinger. This was the ring he had received from the King—there was only one King for him—and it was shown in the picture as a sign that Bengt Löwensköld was his

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faithful servant. He had been forced to listen to much bitter censure of his sovereign; there were those who even ventured to assert that, by his imprudence and recklessness, he had brought his kingdom to the verge of ruin; but the General was loyal to him through everything. The King was a man whose like had never been seen, and those who lived with him had come to realise that there are nobler and higher causes for which to fight than merely worldly honour and success.

The same reason that caused Bengt Löwensköld to display his ring in his portrait made him wish to have it buried in his grave with him. And here, too, there was no question of vanity. He had no wish, certainly, to boast of wearing a great King's jewel on his finger when he appeared in the presence of Our Lord and the Archangels, but he hoped that, when he entered the hall where Charles the Twelfth would be sitting, surrounded by his trusty swordsmen, the ring might win him recognition, so that he would

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spend eternity close to the man whom he had served and honoured all his life.

When the General's coffin was placed in the walled vault which he had prepared for himself in Bro churchyard, the ring was safe on the forefinger of his left hand. Many of those present regretted that so great a treasure should go with the dead man to his grave, for the General's ring was almost as well known as the General himself, and as famous. It was said to be of sufficient value to buy a vast estate, and that the red cornelian, engraved with the King's signature, was no less valuable. People were universally agreed that it was generous of his sons not to oppose his wish, but to bury his treasure with him.

If the General's ring really resembled that represented in the picture, it must certainly have been a clumsy thing which hardly anyone nowadays could wear ; but a few hundred years ago it would have been greatly valued. We must remember that all jewels and vessels of precious metals, with very few exceptions, had to

be handed over to the Crown ; that the nation had to struggle against "Gortz's Tokens" and national bankruptcy, so that, to many people, gold was a thing only spoken of, never seen. This is why folk could not forget the ring, so uselessly buried under the coffin lid. Its burial there was almost an injustice. It might have been taken to some foreign country, sold for a great sum to be used in procuring food for the many who now had nothing to eat save straw and the bark of trees.

Yet, though there were many who longed to possess the great treasure, there was not one who thought seriously of appropriating it. The ring lay in the coffin, with the lid screwed down, in a walled-up grave, under a heavy gravestone, out of reach of the most daring thief, and there they believed it would lie till the end of the world.

II

GENERAL Bengt Löwensköld died in the month of March, 1741, and a few months later in the same year, it happened that his eldest son, George Löwensköld, who lived generally at Hedeby, lost his little daughter from dysentery. She was buried on a Sunday immediately after the service ; the whole congregation joined in the procession to the grave of the Löwenskölds, where the gravestones were standing up on end. The vault underneath had been opened by a mason in order that the dead child's little coffin might lie beside her grandfather's.

While the people were gathered round the grave listening to the burial service, it is possible that many of them remembered the royal ring and regretted that it should be lying hidden and useless in that grave, of no benefit to anyone. Perhaps here and there one whispered to

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his neighbour that it would not be difficult to get the ring, since the grave would not probably be closed again before the next day.

In the crowd there stood a countryman named Bard Bardsson, who lived at Mellomstuga in the village of Olsby. He, however, was not one of those who had worried themselves grey over the ring. On the contrary, when people began talking about it, he always declared that he had a good enough farm, so had no need to envy the General for taking a bushel of gold with him to his grave.

Now, as he stood in the churchyard, it occurred to him, as to so many others, how strange it was that the grave should have been opened. It did not please him, it made him uneasy. He thought to himself : "The Captain ought to have it closed this afternoon, there are many people longing for that ring."

Although it was no concern of his, nevertheless, he kept on thinking how dangerous it would be to leave the grave open all night. It was the month of

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August; the nights were dark, and if the grave was not shut that very day, a thief might easily creep in and carry off the treasure. He was seized with such acute anxiety that he even contemplated going himself to warn the Captain, but he knew that people considered him foolish, and he did not want to make himself a laughing-stock. "You are quite right about this," he thought to himself, "but if you are too officious you will only be laughed at. The Captain, who is such a sensible man, has certainly arranged for the grave to be shut up again."

He was so absorbed with his thoughts that he did not notice that the funeral was over, but stood still beside the grave, and might have stood much longer had not his wife pulled him by the sleeve.

"What is the matter with you?" she said. "You are standing staring at one spot like a cat watching a rat hole."

The man turned round, and, looking up, saw that he and his wife were alone in the churchyard.

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"There's nothing the matter," he said. "I was only just wondering...."

He would have liked to tell his wife what he was wondering, but he knew that she was much sharper than himself. She would only think that he was worrying himself unnecessarily. She would say that if the grave were shut or not was a question that concerned nobody but Captain Löwensköld.

They turned to go home, and, as soon as Bard Bardsson had turned his back on the churchyard, he hoped he would forget the matter. But he did not, for his wife talked of nothing but the funeral, of the coffin, of the bearers, of the procession, and of the sermon; and he put in a word here and there—although he heard scarcely a word that she said—so that she should not know he was not listening. But presently her voice seemed to be reaching him from the far distance, and his brain went back to the worrying thoughts.

"This is Sunday," he thought, "perhaps the mason won't work on a day of

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rest. In that case, if the Captain gave him a rix-dollar, he could do it in the night. If only he could think of that!"

Presently he began to talk to himself aloud. "I ought to go to the Captain in any case. I ought not to mind whether folk laugh at me or not."

He had quite forgotten that his wife was walking beside him, but he pulled himself up when she stopped and stared at him.

"It's nothing," he said, "it's only what I was thinking of before." And so they continued their journey and soon reached their own door.

He hoped now that his troublesome thoughts would leave him; and so they might had he set about some work, but it was Sunday, and on that day the people at Mellomstuga all went to their own quarters after dinner. He remained by himself in the cottage, and immediately the same doubts recurred to his mind.

At last he got up from his seat, and, going out, began to saddle his horse,

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intending to ride to Hedeby and speak to the Captain.

"If I don't," he thought, "the ring will be stolen to-night."

Nevertheless, he could not bring himself to take the matter so seriously. He was too shy. He went, instead, to the farm of one of his neighbours, intending to tell the man about his anxiety; but as the man was not alone, he again felt too shy to speak, and ended by riding home without having said a word about the matter.

As soon as the sun set, he went to bed determining to sleep till morning; but there was no sleep for him. All his restlessness came back, and he lay tossing and turning the whole night. His wife, naturally, could not sleep either, and after a time she asked him why he was so restless.

"It is nothing," he answered as usual. "Only something I am thinking about."

"You have said that several times already to-day," answered his wife, "but I think it is time now for you to

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tell me what you *are* thinking about. You can't have anything so dangerous in your mind that you can't tell me about it, surely?"

Bard persuaded himself, on hearing his wife speak thus, that, if he told her his trouble, he would get to sleep.

"I am only wondering whether the old General's vault has been closed up," he said, "or whether it will stay open all night."

His wife laughed. "I've been thinking of that too," she said, "and I expect that everybody in church to-day was thinking the same. But you needn't let a thing like that rob you of your sleep."

Bard was glad that his wife took the matter so easily. He felt relieved and certain that now he would sleep.

But hardly had he settled himself before it all started again. He saw shadows come stealing out of every cottage, every quarter, all going on the same errand; all turning their steps toward the churchyard with the open vault. He tried to lie still so that his

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wife might sleep, but his head ached and his body sweated. He was forced to toss and turn. At last his wife lost all patience and blurted out, half in jest:

"Dear husband, I really think you had better go to the churchyard and see after the grave yourself, instead of tossing from side to side and never closing your eyes."

The words were hardly out of her mouth before her husband jumped out of bed and began to dress himself. He thought his wife was right. It was not more than half an hour's walk from Olsby to Bro church; he would be back within an hour, and then could have a good night's rest. But scarcely was he outside the door before it occurred to his wife that it would be a dreadful thing to let him go all alone to the churchyard; so she sprang up hastily, and she too put on her clothes.

She caught up to her husband on the slope, just below Olsby. Bard laughed as he heard her coming up behind.

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"Have you come to see that I don't steal the General's ring?" he asked.

"Good gracious!" she said. "I know that you wouldn't think of such a thing. I only came to help you in case you met a ghoul or a hellhound."

They went forward at a brisk pace. Night had fallen, and it was quite dark except for a narrow streak of light in the western sky, but they were quite sure of the road. They chatted together and were in high spirits. They were only going to the churchyard to see whether the grave was still open, so that Bard could stop worrying and go to sleep.

"I can't believe that the family at Hedeby can be so rash as not to have had the ring fastened up again," said Bard.

"Well, we shall soon know," said his wife. "I believe that's the churchyard wall just close to us now."

The man stopped. He wondered why his wife's voice sounded so cheerful. Surely she could have no other reason than his own for coming on this journey.

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"Before we go into the churchyard," said Bard, "we must come to some agreement as to what to do in case the grave is open."

"Whether it is open or not, I don't see that there is anything we can do, except go home and get into bed."

"No, you are right," said Bard, and went on. After a little, he said again, "I suppose we can hardly expect to find the churchyard gate unlocked at this hour."

"No, it's shut. We shall have to climb over the wall, if we want to pay a visit to the General and see how he is."

Again the man was astonished. He heard a slight rattle of falling stones, and his wife's form was outlined against the strip of bright sky toward the west. She had climbed to the top of the wall, which, after all, was not a great feat, as it was only a couple of feet high; but it was strange that she should be so eager to get in before him.

"Here," she said, "give me your hand, I will help you up."

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They soon left the wall and went forward silently and carefully between the little mounds. Once Bard stumbled over a grave and nearly fell ; it seemed to him as if someone had tripped him up. He was so terrified that he trembled, but he said in a loud voice, so that the dead might understand how benevolent he was :

“ I should not be walking here if there was any harm in my errand.”

“ You may well say that ! ” said his wife. “ You are quite right. But, do you see, there is the grave over there.”

He could just see the gravestone standing on end, outlined against the dark sky. They soon reached the grave, and found it still open. The opening into the vault had not been walled up.

“ I think this is dreadfully careless,” said the man. “ I believe it is only done to expose all the people, who know how great a treasure lies hidden here, to the greatest temptation.”

“ They rely on the idea that no one will dare to rob the dead,” said his wife,

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is no cold hand that will squeeze the life out of me.”

“ You see, he won’t do anything to us, because he knows that we don’t intend to steal the ring. But, suppose, just for fun, we were to begin to unscrew the coffin lid ! ”

Immediately the man approached the General’s coffin, and began fumbling along the lid. He came upon a screw which had a little cross on the top.

“ Everything here seems to have been prepared for a thief,” said he, and began carefully and dexterously to unscrew the lid.

“ Do you feel anything ? ” asked the wife. “ Don’t you feel something moving under the lid ? ”

“ He lies as still as the grave,” answered the man.

“ He knows, of course, that we don’t intend to remove the thing he values most,” said the woman. “ It would be quite a different thing if we took off the lid.”

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"Well, you'd better help me to do it," said the husband.

They raised the lid, and then it was impossible to restrain their longing for the treasure. They took the ring off the withered finger, replaced the lid on the coffin, and stole out of the vault in dead silence. They held each other by the hand while crossing the churchyard, and it was not until they had reclimbed the stone wall and reached the road that they dared to speak a word.

"Now I begin to think," said the woman, "that he has willed this. He understands that it isn't right of a dead man to keep such a firm death grip on a thing, and he has given it to us of his own free will."

Her husband laughed loudly. "I like that!" he said. "You will never make me believe that he let us take it willingly; we took it because he hadn't power to prevent us."

"Do you know," said his wife, "you have been very brave to-night. There aren't many people who would

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have ventured into the General's grave."

"I don't think I could have done it, if I were doing anything wrong, for I have never taken so much as a rix-dollar from a living man. But what harm can there be in taking something from a dead man that he does not want?"

They felt proud and happy as they walked along. They wondered why more people had not had the same thought as theirs. Bard said he intended to go to Norway and sell the ring as soon as he could see an opportunity. They believed that they would get enough money for it to keep them from want for the rest of their lives.

Suddenly the woman stood still. "What is that light I see over there, away to the east? Is the day beginning to dawn already?"

"No, it can't be the sun rising already," said the peasant. "It must be a fire—it seems to be in the direction of Olsby. Can it possibly be—"

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He broke off, on hearing a wild shriek from his wife.

"It is our cottage burning," she screamed. "It is Mellomstuga burning —the General has set fire to it. . . ."

On Monday morning the sexton went hurrying to Hedeby, which lay not far from the church, to announce that when the mason and he had gone to the grave to wall up the vault, they both noticed that the coffin lid was crooked and that the stars and shields, with which it was ornamented, had been stolen.

An investigation was immediately set on foot. There was evidence of great disorder in the grave, and they found that the screws in the lid of the coffin were loose. As soon as the lid was lifted, they saw, at one glance, that the General's ring was no longer in its place on his forefinger!

III

I OFTEN think about King Charles the Twelfth and try to understand why people so loved and feared him.

I have heard that, one day toward the close of his life, he went to Karlstad church while the service was going on. He had ridden, alone and unexpectedly, into the town, and, hearing that service was proceeding, he left his horse outside the gate and entered the church through the porch, in the same way as anybody else.

As soon as he got inside the door, he saw that the clergyman was in the pulpit, and, in order not to disturb anyone, he stood still and, without trying to find a seat, remained leaning against the doorpost, listening to the sermon.

But although he had entered so quietly, and although he stood in the dark, under the gallery, there was one in the last pew who recognized the King.

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It was probably some old soldier ; he had lost an arm or a leg during the campaign, and had been sent home before the battle of Poltava, and he knew that the man with the upcombed hair and hooked nose could be no other than the King. On recognising him, the man immediately stood up.

His neighbours in the pew wondered what he was doing, so he whispered to them that the King was in church. And positively every man in the pew immediately stood and remained standing, as is the custom when God's Word is read from the altar or the pulpit. The news spread swiftly from seat to seat, till, finally, every person present—young and old, rich and poor, strong and weak—was standing.

As already said, this happened during the latter years of Charles's life, when trouble and opposition had begun ; there was, in that church, probably hardly a man who had not been bereft of his kinsmen, or lost his possessions, in the King's cause. Even if they had nothing per-

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sonal to lament, there was much food for reflection over the country, which lay impoverished, over the provinces lost, and the many enemies encompassing the land.

But, always and everywhere, it was the same, and now it was enough for the whisper to go round that this man, whom they had so often cursed, stood among them in God's House, to make every person present to rise to his feet. And so they continued to stand. There was not a man among them that would have thought of sitting. They could not. There stood the King near the door, and so long as he stood, so long would they all stand. To sit would have been to dishonour the King.

It would probably be a long sermon, but they must be patient. They must not fail the man standing there at the door.

He was a soldier-king, and was accustomed to see his soldiers go willingly to death for him. But here, in the church, he was surrounded by simple peasants

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and artizans, by ordinary Swedish men and women, who had never aspired to sacrifice. Yet, he had but to show himself, and they were immediately under his dominion. They would go anywhere, do anything, for him, for they believed in him and worshipped him. In the whole church, there was not a person who did not that day thank God for the marvellous man who was Sweden's King.

I have tried, as I have said, to understand how this love for King Charles could fill a man's whole soul, how it could fix itself so firmly in the heart of an old, harsh, rugged man that people all expected to find it there even after death. . . .

Indeed, the thing that most astonished the people of Bro, when it was discovered that the ring had been stolen, was that anyone had had the courage to carry out the project. It was known that loving women had had their betrothal rings stolen from their coffins, and the robber had escaped scot free; a mother had been

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buried with a lock of her child's hair clasped in her hands ; this, too, had been fearlessly reft from her. Again, a pastor had lain in his grave with a Bible for his pillow ; this could have been stolen without harm to the criminal. But to steal Charles the Twelfth's ring from the finger of the dead General at Hedeby, was a crime that they could not believe any man born of woman would dare to commit.

A thorough search was carried out, but not the faintest clue could be found by which to identify the thief. He had come and gone during the dark night, without leaving any tracee which could help the seekers.

Here, again, people were surprised, for they had often heard of ghosts walking night after night in order to point out the doers of far lighter crimes. No one was the least astonished, therefore, when, at last, it was found that the General had by no means left his ring to its fate, but had fought to reclaim it with the same bitter mercilessness that he

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would have shown had the ring been stolen from him during his lifetime.

Nor did they show any doubt about the fact, for it was exactly what they had expected.

IV

MANY years had passed since the disappearance of the General's ring when it happened, one beautiful morning, that the rector of Bro was called to see a poor peasant, Bard Bardsson, who lived in the Olsby district. He was dying, and it was necessary that he should speak to the rector himself before he died.

The rector was an old man, and when he heard that it was a question of visiting a sick parishioner, living miles away, in the trackless forest, it occurred to him that his curate might very well go in his stead. The message, however, had been brought by the dying man's young daughter, who, on hearing this decision, answered firmly that the rector himself must come and no one else. Father had told her to say that he wanted to tell the rector something that no one else in the world must hear.

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The rector tried to throw his memory back into the past. Bard Bardsson had been a quiet man—certainly he had been rather foolish, but that was not a thing to cause a man uneasiness on his death-bed. Judged from a purely human standpoint, the rector thought he might have been one to find favour with God. During the last seven years, the man had met with every kind of misfortune. His farmhouse had been burned down; his cattle had died of disease or had been carried off by wild animals; his fields had been ruined by frost, so that he was now as poor as Job. Finally, his wife had been so distracted by all these troubles that she had drowned herself in a lake, and then Bard had gone to live at a small outlying farm, the only thing left to him now. Since that time, neither he nor his two children had ever been to church, and they had often wondered, at the Rectory, what had become of the family.

"If I judge rightly about your father, I don't think he can have done anything

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that he cannot confess to the curate," said the rector, looking with a friendly smile at Bardsson's daughter.

She was a girl of fourteen, tall and strong for her age. She had a broad face with rather coarse features, a somewhat foolish expression, like her father; but childish innocence and candour brightened up her face.

"Perhaps you are afraid of Strong Bengt, sir, and that is why you don't want to come to us," she said.

"What do you say, child?" returned the rector. "Who is this Strong Bengt you are talking about?"

"Oh, sir, he is the person who has made everything go wrong with us."

"Well, well," said the rector, "so there is a person called Strong Bengt, is there?"

"Don't you know it was he who burned down Mellomstuga?"

"No, I never heard that before," said the rector; at the same time getting up from his chair, he began to take out a prayer book and a little wooden chalice,

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which he always carried with him on his sick calls.

"He haunted my mother into the lake," continued the girl.

"Ah, that was very dreadful, poor child," said the rector. "Is this Strong Bengt still alive? Have you ever seen him?"

"No, sir, I have never seen him," said the child, "but he is still alive. It was because of him that we had to go and live in the forest on the wild fell. We have had peace from him since we went there until last week, and then Father cut his foot."

"Do you think that was Strong Bengt's fault?" asked the rector in his gentle voice, at the same time opening the door and calling his servant. He told the man to saddle his horse.

"Father says that Strong Bengt bewitched the axe, or he would never have cut himself. It wasn't a bad wound at first, but to-day Father says that mortification has set up in his foot. He says he's got to die because Strong Bengt has."

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done for him, so he sent me to the Rectory to beg you to come yourself, sir, as quickly as you can."

"I will come," said the reector. While the girl was speaking, he had put on his hat and riding cloak. He went on:

"I can't think why this Strong Bengt should be so horrid to your father. Bard must have done something to him."

"Father doesn't deny that," said the child. "But he will never tell either me or my brother what it is. I think that is what he wants to tell you now."

"If that is the case, we cannot get there soon enough." He drew on his riding gloves, and, mounting his horse, took the child on the saddle in front of him.

The reector scarcely uttered a word during the long ride to the farm. He sat pondering on the extraordinary things the girl had told him. He remembered having just met a man whom people called Strong Bengt; but it was possible that she was alluding to someone quite different.

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A young man came out to meet him, as he rode into the yard ; it was Ingilbert, Bard Bardsson's son. He was some years older than his sister, well grown, too, and somewhat resembling her in features, but he had deep-set eyes and lacked her candid, good-natured expression.

" You have had a long ride, sir," he said as he helped him off his horse.

" Yes," answered the old man, " but we came along faster than I expected."

" I ought to have come and fetched you," said Ingilbert, " but I was out all night fishing, and only heard when I came home just now that Father's foot was bad and that he had sent for you."

" Martha has been as good as a boy," said the rector, " and we got along famously. But how is Bard now ? "

" He is very bad, but he is prepared. He was glad when I told him that you had appeared at the edge of the clearing."

The rector went straight in to Bard, and the brother and sister sat on a broad

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stone slab outside the cottage, to wait. They felt in a solemn mood, and talked about their dying father. They said how good he had always been to them; but he had never been happy since the fire at Mellomstuga, so perhaps it was better that he was going. Suddenly, the girl exclaimed that she was sure Father must have had something weighing on his conscience.

"He!" said her brother. "What could he have? I have never seen him lift his hand to a man or an animal."

"But there is something he wants to talk to the rector about—only to him."

"Did he tell you that? Did he say he wanted to speak to him before he died? I thought he only wanted him to give him Holy Communion."

"When he sent me off, this morning, he said I was to beg the rector himself to come, as he was the only man in the world to whom he could confess his heavy sin."

Ingilbert sat thinking for a moment. "How curious," he said. "I wonder

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if it is something he has imagined all the time he has been here alone. All that he has told us about Strong Bengt—I don't believe it is anything but imagination either."

"It is just about Strong Bengt that he wants to talk to the rector," said the girl.

"You can bet the whole thing is only a lie," said Ingilbert.

He got up and went to a small shutter, that stood open to let a little light and air into the windowless cottage. The sick man's bed stood so near the opening that Ingilbert could hear every word his father said; and the son stood and listened without the slightest twinge of conscience. Perhaps he had never even heard how very wrong it was to listen to a confession. Anyway, he did not believe that his father could have any very dangerous secret to confess.

After he had stood near the opening for a time, he returned to his sister.

"What did I tell you?" he began.
"There is Father telling the rector that

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he and Mother stole the ring from old General Löwensköld."

"God be merciful to us!" cried his sister. "Do let us tell the rector that it is all a lie, that he has imagined it all."

"We can't do anything now," said Ingilbert. "Father must say what he likes, and we will tell the rector afterward."

He stole back to the opening to listen; but it was not long before he returned to his sister.

"He says now that the same night they had been to the grave, Mellomstuga was burned down. He says he believes it was the General himself who burned the house."

"You can hear it is all an invention," said his sister. "He has told us a hundred times that it was Strong Bengt who set fire to Mellomstuga."

Ingilbert was back at his post under the shutter before she had finished speaking. He stood a long time listening, and when he came back to his sister his face was ashen.

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"He says it was the General who sent all his misfortunes to force him to put the ring back. He says that Mother was frightened and wanted him to go with her to the Captain at Hedeby and give him back the ring; Father wanted to obey her, but dared not go, because he thought they would both be hanged if they acknowledged that they had stolen from the dead. But Mother could bear no more, so she went and drowned herself."

It was the sister's turn to grow ashen white.

"But," she began, "Father always said it was—"

"Yes, yes, I know. He has just been explaining that he never dared to tell anyone who had brought all these misfortunes on him. Only to us, children who didn't understand, he had said it was Strong Bengt who pursued him. He says the country people always called the General Strong Bengt."

Martha crouched down where she sat on the stone slab.

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"It must be true after all," she whispered, so low that it might have been her dying sigh. She gazed around in every direction. The farm stood near the edge of a forest tarn, and the tree-clad mountain ridges rose darkly on every side. There was no human dwelling within sight—there was not a soul to whom she could turn for help. Nothing reigned there but a great helpless solitude. And she thought she could see the dead man lying in wait under the gloomy trees, ready to send more misfortune.

She was still too much of a child to realise fully the shame and dishonour brought on her by her parents; but, as far as she could understand, it was a ghost, an implacable, all-powerful creature from the other world, who haunted them. She expected that she might see him at any moment, and her terror was so great that her teeth chattered. She thought how her father had lived for seven years with this same terror in his soul. She knew that seven years had passed since the fire at Mellomstuga, and

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all that time her father had known that he was being pursued by a dead man. Surely it was best that he should die.

Ingilbert had been listening again at the shutter, and when he returned to her, she said, making a last effort to escape from her terror :

" You don't believe it, Ingilbert, do you ? " But as she looked at him, she saw that his hands shook and his eyes were wide with fear. He was as frightened as she was.

" What can I think ? " whispered Ingilbert. " Father says that he tried several times to go to Norway to sell the ring, but he could never succeed. Once he fell ill, another time his horse fell and broke his leg, just as he was riding out of the gate."

" What did the rector say ? " asked the girl.

" He asked why he had kept the ring all that time when he knew how dangerous it was to have it in his possession. Father said he thought the Captain

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would have had him hanged if he had acknowledged his crime. He had no choice but to keep it. But now that he is dying, he wants to give the ring to the rector, so that he may put it back in the General's grave, and then we children will be freed from the curse and will be able to go back to the village."

"I am glad the rector is here," said his sister, "I don't know what I shall do when he goes away. I am so frightened I believe I can see the General standing there under the pine trees. Think! he has been here every day, watching us. Perhaps Father has even seen him!"

"I am sure Father has seen him," said Ingilbert.

He went off to listen again, and when he came back he had a different expression in his eyes.

"I have seen the ring," he said. "Father has given it to the rector; it shone like a flame of fire. All red and yellow! It sparkled! The rector looked hard at it and said he recognised it as

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the General's ring. Go to the opening yourself—you will see it."

"I would rather hold a snake in my hand than look at that ring!" said Martha. "You surely can't think it is beautiful to look at?"

Ingilbert looked away from her. "I know very well that it has ruined us, but all the same I admire it."

Just as he pronounced these words, the rector's voice reached them; they could hear him speaking loud and clear. Hitherto, he had allowed the sick man to speak, but now it was his turn. Evidently, he did not hold with all the wild talk about the dead man's hauntings. He tried to point out to the peasant that the judgment of God had struck him for committing so gruesome a crime as to rob the dead. He absolutely refused to admit that the General had power to burn houses or to send sickness either on men or on cattle. No, the misfortunes which had ruined Bard were God's method of forcing him to repent, and to restore the ring while he was still

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once cross the bog, it would be a considerable short cut.

The rector cast a sharp glance at the young man. He had an impression that Ingilbert, like his father, was possessed by a love of money. He remembered how he had come to his father's room, more than once, to prevent him from parting with the ring.

"This is a very narrow, dangerous road, Ingilbert," he said. "I am afraid that the horse may fall on these slippery logs."

"I will lead the horse, sir, so that you need not be afraid." So saying, Ingilbert seized the horse by the reins.

When they reached the middle of the little bridge and were surrounded on all sides by the bog, he began to force the horse backward. It seemed as though he wanted to push it off the log bridge.

The horse reared, and the rector, who could with difficulty remain in the saddle, shouted to him, for Ged's sake, to let go the reins.

But Ingilbert appeared not to hear.

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The rector could see him, with angry face and tight-clenched teeth, struggling to force the horse over into the bog. Certain death awaited both the man and the animal, if he should succeed.

Then the rector thrust his hand into his pocket, and, drawing out a little goat-skin bag, he hurled it in Ingilbert's face. The latter let go the reins in order to catch the bag, and the horse, being free, galloped madly along the path.

Ingilbert remained standing where he was and made no effort to overtake them.

V

IT is not to be wondered at that, after so violent a ride, the rector should feel a little giddy and light in the head ; and evening had fallen before he reached the village. Neither is it to be wondered at that he did not leave the forest by the Olsby road, but went a long way round to the south and came out quite close to Hedeby.

While trying to find his way through the forest, he made up his mind that as soon as he reached home he would send a message to Carelius, the sheriff, begging him to go at once and get the ring from Ingilbert. But when he found that he was riding so near to Hedeby, he reasoned with himself whether it would not be advisable to go up to the house, see the Captain himself, and tell him who had stolen the ring from the vault.

One can hardly think that the rector

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need have hesitated long over so natural a course; but the fact was that no very good feeling had existed between the Captain and his father. The Captain was a man of peace; his father had certainly been a man of strife. As soon as peace had been concluded with Russia, the Captain had left the army and had used all the energies he possessed to further the well-being of his country, which had been brought to the verge of ruin during the long years of war. He was opposed to all despotism and cared little for military honours; indeed, he had even been heard to speak ill of Charles himself, and of many others whom the old man had esteemed highly. What was even worse, the Captain had taken a lively share in the parliamentary discussions on the war, but always as an adherent of the Peace Party. It may thus be seen that there was no lack of subjects for dispute between father and son.

When the General's ring had disappeared, seven years previously, the

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that senseless privateer, who was created an admiral by King Charles the Twelfth? Who hasn't heard of him?"

"While we were at dinner to-day," continued the Captain, "the conversation turned on the old war days. My sons and their tutor asked me to tell them something about the war—young people always like to hear these things. I daresay you have noticed that they prefer to hear all about those fatal wars rather than to know something of the hard, troublous years through which we Swedes had to struggle after Charles's death, or of what we suffered through bankruptcy and loss. My God! do they think it was an easy task to rebuild burned towns, to restart manufactories and workshops, to cut down forests and reclaim the lands? I believe that my sons are ashamed of me and my contemporaries because we tried to put an end to military expeditions and to the devastation of foreign countries. They seem to think that we are worse men

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than our fathers, and that the Swedish strength has gone out of us."

" You are perfectly right, my friend," said the rector. " These young people's love of warlike things is greatly to be deplored."

" Anyhow, I satisfied their wishes," said the Captain, " and, as they wanted to hear about a great warrior, I told them about Gatenhielm and his cruel treatment of merchants and peaceful travellers, hoping to rouse their horror and disgust. When I had succeeded in doing so, I bade them remember that this Gatenhielm was a true son of the warlike days in which he lived, and I asked them whether they would like to see the world peopled by such infernal monsters.

" But before my sons had time to answer, their tutor took up the parable, and asked my permission to tell yet another story about Gatenhielm. As he assured me that the adventure he was about to relate would only confirm what I had said about Gatenhielm's

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wildness and cruelty, I allowed him to proceed.

" He then began by telling us that, when Gatenhielm was dead and his body laid in Onsala church, in a marble sarcophagus that he had stolen from the Danish king, there were so many ghostly happenings in the church that the parishioners of Onsala could not endure them. They decided, therefore, that there was no other course but to lift the corpse out of the tomb and inter it on a bare rock, far out to sea.

" After that was done, peace reigned in the church ; but the fishermen, whose duty took them past Gatenhielm's new resting place, described how they heard noises of all kinds and saw the foam dashing high over the unlucky rock. The fishermen believed that all the sailors and traders whom Gatenhielm had thrown overboard from the captured vessels, were now rising from their watery graves, to torment and ill-treat him ; they were, therefore, very careful not to go too near the rock.

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"One night, however, one of the fishermen, who had sailed rather near, found himself swept into a whirlpool; the foam lashed his face, and a voice roared at him: 'Go to Gata in Onsala, and tell my wife to send me seven hazel sticks and two cudgels!'"

So far, the rector had listened patiently and silently to the Captain; but when he perceived that his friend had nothing better than an ordinary ghost story to relate, he could scarcely restrain a movement of impatience. The Captain, however, paid no attention to him but continued his tale.

"You can understand that there was nothing for it but to obey the command. Gatenhielm's wife also obeyed. The toughest hazel sticks and thickest cudgels were prepared, and a servant from Onsala rowed out to the rock with them."

At this point the rector made so marked an effort to interrupt him that the Captain noticed his impatience.

"I know what you are thinking,

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rector," he said. "Indeed, I thought the same myself when I listened to the story at dinner, but I must beg you to hear me to the end. I must say, I think that servant from Onsala must have had a stout heart and great devotion to his master, otherwise he would never have dared to carry out such an order. As he approached the burying place, the waves dashed over it as in a raging storm, and there was noise and uproar all around. But the man rowed as near as he could, and succeeded in throwing the sticks and cudgels on to the rock. Thereupon he hurried off, rowing with swift strokes to get away from the dreadful place."

"My dear Captain," began the rector, but the Captain was firm.

"He did not row very far, however, before he rested on his oars and watched to see whether anything extraordinary would happen. He had not long to wait. Suddenly the waves dashed sky-high over the rock; the noise was as the roar of guns on the battlefield; gruesome cries of distress went out across the sea. The

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uproar continued for a time, but with diminishing vigour, and eventually the waves ceased to rage over Gatenhielm's grave, and left the rock lying calm and peaceful like any other.

"The servant plied his oars again on his homeward journey, when suddenly he heard a loud, triumphant voice calling out: 'Go to Gata in Onsala and tell my wife that Lasse Gatenhielm triumphs over his enemies, both in life and in death!'"

The rector had been listening with bowed head, but now that the story was finished, he looked up inquiringly at the Captain.

"As the tutor said the last words," said the Captain, "I could see that my sons sympathised with that scoundrel, Gatenhielm, and enjoyed hearing about his arrogance. I recognised that the story was well constructed, but it could be nothing but a lie. I said to myself: 'If a rough pirate like Gatenhielm possessed power to assert himself, even after death, how can I explain the fact that

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my father, who was as great a swash-buckler as Gatenhielm but also a good and honourable man, should have let himself be robbed of his dearest possession, without doing anything to hinder the theft or to molest the guilty person in any way since? ’ ”

On hearing these words, the rector looked up with unwonted animation. “ That is exactly my idea,” he said.

“ Yes, but listen to what happened next,” said the Captain. “ I had scarcely said these words when I heard a deep sigh just behind my chair. It was so like the tired sigh my poor old father used to give when he was suffering from the infirmities of his old age that I thought he was really there, and I got up from my chair. Of course, I saw nothing, but I was so certain that I had heard him that, instead of going back to the dinner table, I came in here, and have been sitting alone ever since, pondering over the matter.

“ I should much like to hear your opinion of this, my dear old friend; was

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it my father whom I heard? Was he sighing over his lost treasure? If I believed that, ever since, he has been longing for it, I should go from farm to farm myself to search for the ring, rather than he should have to bear the bitter sorrow contained in that sigh."

"This is the second time to-day that I have had to answer this question—whether the dead General is still mourning over his lost ring and wishes to recover it," said the rector. "With your permission, I will now tell you my story, and we must come to some conclusion."

Therewith the rector began his story, and he soon saw that he need have no fear that the Captain would not energetically espouse his father's cause. He had never imagined that so gentle and peaceful a soul as that of the Captain could contain so much of the old Adam. But they tell us that even the little pigs grunt when the old boar suffers. He saw the veins swelling in the Captain's forehead, and he clenched his fist so that the

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knuckles showed white. He was seized with furious anger.

The rector, naturally, represented the case from his own point of view. He said how God's wrath had been visited on the evildoer, and would not admit that there had been any interference from the dead man.

Captain Löwensköld, however, interpreted all that he heard in quite a different way. He understood, now, that his father had been unable to rest in his grave because the ring had been removed from his finger. He felt anguish and remorse because he had hitherto taken the matter so lightly. He felt it as a pricking, aching wound in his heart.

When the rector saw how upset he was, he was almost afraid to tell him how the ring had been taken from himself by Ingilbert; however, he accepted the fact with a sort of bitter satisfaction.

"It is well that one of the pack of thieves still remains and that he is as great a scoundrel as the rest of them.

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The General has punished them and has hit hard ; now it is my turn."

The rector noticed a merciless harshness in the Captain's voice. He grew more and more uneasy and began to fear lest the angry man should strangle Ingilbert with his own hands, or perhaps whip him to death.

" I felt it my duty to tell you of the dead man's confession, Captain," he said, " but I hope that you will not do anything hasty. I propose now to inform the sheriff about the theft of the ring from myself."

" You may do as you like about that," said the Captain. " But I will only say that you will give yourself unnecessary trouble, for I shall take the matter into my own hands now."

After this, the rector knew that there was nothing further to do at Hedeby ; he therefore rode away as fast as he could, hoping to be able to send a message to the sheriff before nightfall.

Captain Löwensköld called all his men together, told them what had happened,

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and asked them if they were willing to accompany him next morning, at four o'clock, to hunt for the thief. There was not a man among them who refused to do such a service for the dead General and for his son ; and the remainder of the evening was spent collecting all sorts of weapons, old blunderbusses, short hunting spears, long swords, cudgels, and scythes.

VI

NEXT morning, when the Captain started, at four o'clock, to hunt for the thief, he was accompanied by as many as fifteen men. They were all in the best possible humour. They had a just cause and the old General at their back, for if he had managed to carry the affair so far, he would certainly carry it to a successful conclusion.

They had some miles to go before reaching the real wilderness. On starting from Hedeby, they had first to traverse a wide valley, cultivated in parts, and studded with small farms. Here and there, on the surrounding ridges, there were fairly large villages. One of these was Olsby, where Bard Bardsson had lived before the General burned down his farm.

Farther on lay the great forest, spread over the earth like a thick pelt, tree after tree, without a break. But still there

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were signs of human activity. There were small paths which led through the forest to summer cottages and charcoal burners' clearings.

The Captain and his men seemed to take on a new mood, a new bearing, the farther they penetrated into the wood. They were out after game, and the hunting spirit sprang up within them. They cast sharp glances toward the thickets as they began to walk carefully and lightly, almost creeping as they went.

"We must arrange about one thing, boys," said the Captain. "None of you need worry about the thief—you can leave him to me. All you have to do, is to see that he doesn't escape."

This warning was not without its significance. These men who, on the previous day, had been peacefully occupied, spreading the hay on hurdles to dry, were now on fire with a longing to give Ingilbert, the thief, something by which he should remember them.

Meanwhile, they had reached a spot where great pine trees that had stood

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from all eternity grew so thickly packed that they spread above their heads, like an unbroken roof; the undergrowth had ceased, and only moss covered the ground. Suddenly, they saw three men coming toward them, carrying a stretcher made of boughs, on which lay a fourth man.

The Captain and his party hastened forward to meet them, and the bearers stopped on seeing such a crowd of people. They had laid large bracken leaves over the dead man's face so that no one could see who it was; but the men of Hedeby guessed, and a shudder ran through them.

They did not see the General beside the bier. No! Not even a glimpse of him. But, anyhow, they knew he was there! He had come from the forest with the dead man—he was pointing toward him with his finger.

The three men who bore the stretcher were well-known, respectable folk. There was Erie Ivarsson, who owned a large farm at Olsby, and his brother, Ivar,

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Ivarsson, who had never married but remained on with his brother in the old home. They were both elderly, but the third was young. He also was known to them all. He was Paul Eliasson, and was the adopted son of the two old brothers.

The Captain went up to the Ivarssons, and they set down the stretcher in order to shake hands with him. But he appeared not to notice them, he seemed unable to take his eyes off the fern leaves which covered the face of him who lay on the bier.

"Is that Ingilbert Bardsson lying there?" he asked, in a strange, hard voice. He seemed to be speaking against his will.

"Yes," answered Eric, "but how did you know, Captain? Did you recognise him by his clothes?"

"No," said the Captain, "I did not recognise him by his clothes. I have not seen him for five years."

Both his own men and the strangers regarded the Captain curiously. There seemed to be something strange and

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mysterious in his manner that morning. He was unlike himself. As a rule, he was polite and friendly.

He began to question the Ivarssons. What were they doing out in the forest so early, where had they found Ingilbert? The Ivarssons were well-to-do farmers, and they resented being questioned in this manner; however, he managed to extract from them the chief facts. On the previous day, they had gone to visit some of their people on an outlying farm, some miles farther on, carrying meat and provisions with them, and had slept there overnight. Very early in the morning, they had started on their homeward journey, Ivar walking in front of the two others, for having been a soldier he had caught the trick of marching.

He was a good way on in front when he saw a man coming along the path toward him. The forest was fairly open just there, no shrubs, only bare tree-stems, so he could see the man a good way off. He had not recognised him immediately,

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for a thin mist hovered between the trees, looking like yellow smoke when the sunshine glinted athwart it, and this had prevented his seeing the other very clearly.

Ivar said that, as soon as the man caught sight of him through the mist, he stopped in terror, stretching out his hands toward him with a beseeching gesture. As Ivar continued to approach, he called out not to come any nearer. He seemed to be insane, and Ivar thought to try and quiet him, but the other immediately fled into the wood. He had run only a few steps when suddenly he fell forward and lay motionless. By the time Ivar got up to him he was dead, but he recognised him as Ingilbert, son of that Bard Bardsson who used formerly to live at Olsby, but had moved to a smaller place after his house was burned down and his wife had drowned herself. He could not understand why Ingilbert fell dead, for no one had touched him; and, though he had tried to shake some life into him, he could do

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no good. As soon as the others came up, they saw that he was dead. As Bardsson had been their neighbour, when he lived at Olsby, they could not leave Ingilbert lying there in the forest, so they had knocked together a stretcher and brought him with them.

The Captain listened with a dark frown. It sounded quite probable. There lay Ingilbert, equipped for a long journey—a knapsack on his back, thick shoes on his feet. The hunting spear lying on the stretcher was also his. Undoubtedly, he had been starting for some foreign country, where he could sell the ring, but on seeing Ivar through the mist he had thought he saw the General's ghost. Yes, that is what must have happened. Ivarsson was dressed in an old uniform and had the brim of his hat turned up in the Carolinian manner. The distance, the mist, and his evil conscience were enough to account for the mistake.

In spite, however, of this explanation, the Captain's displeasure grew; he worked himself up to a fury of blood-

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a contusion on his forehead. The Ivarssons had said that he struck his head against a stone as he fell ; but might that contusion not also have been caused by the thick, knotted stick that Paul Eliasson was carrying in his hand ?

The Captain stood staring on the ground. A great struggle was taking place in his mind. He had never heard anything but good spoken of these three men, and it went against him to think that they had robbed and murdered.

His men closed up round him. Some of them were already fingering their weapons ; they never expected to leave that place without a fight.

But Eric Ivarsson stepped forward and said :

“ Captain Löwensköld, my brother and I, as well as Paul Eliasson—who is our adopted son and is soon to be my son-in-law—know very well what you and your people are thinking about us. We consider that we ought not to part until you have searched our pockets and garments, also.”

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On hearing this offer, a ray of light stole into the blackness of the Captain's soul. He objected. Both the Ivarssons and Paul Eliasson were persons upon whom no suspicion could fall.

But the farmers wanted to put an end to the affair, and they began to take off their shoes and to turn out their pockets; so the Captain made a sign to his men to let them have their way.

No ring was to be seen; but in the wallet that Ivar Ivarsson carried on his back there was found a little goatskin bag.

"Does this bag belong to you?" asked the Captain, after searching it and finding it empty.

Now had Ivar answered "yes," the matter would have ended, but, instead, he gave utterance to the most frightful lie.

"No, it was lying on the path, not far from the place where Ingilbert fell. I picked it up and threw it into my wallet, because it looked new and unused."

"But it was in just such a bag that

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the ring lay when the rector threw it to Ingilbert," said the Captain; and the anger reappeared, both in his face and in his voice.

"Now there is nothing for it but you three must come with me to the sheriff, unless you prefer to hand the ring over to me voluntarily."

But the patience of the Olsby men was exhausted.

"You, Captain Löwensköld, have no right to get us arrested," said Eric Ivarsson; whereupon, seizing the very spear which lay on the bier beside Ingilbert, he proceeded to force his way through the men, accompanied by his brother and his adopted son.

In their first astonishment, the Hedeby men fell back—all except the Captain, who laughed aloud with satisfaction at the chance of letting loose his wrath. Drawing his sword, he thrust aside the spear.

But that was the only feat of arms in the battle. The Captain felt himself suddenly pulled back by his own men

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and the weapon snatched from his hand. It happened that Carelius, the sheriff, had seen fit to walk into the forest that morning, accompanied by a constable, and he now appeared in the centre of the path in the very nick of time.

Then began fresh searchings and questionings, with the result that Eric Ivarsson, his brother Ivar, and Paul Eliasson were all arrested and led off to prison on the charge of having robbed and murdered.

VII

IT cannot be denied that in Varmland, in those olden days, our forests were vast and our fields narrow; our farms were large, but our houses were small. Our roads, too, were narrow, and our hillsides steep; the doors of our houses were not wide, but the doorposts were tall; our churches were small, but our services long! Added to this, the years of our life were few, but our difficulties were beyond reckoning. Yet, in spite of all, we folk in Varmland were neither grumblers nor commonplace individuals.

It is true that the frost spoiled our crops, and that wild beasts took our cattle, and that illness bereft us of our children—yet we had the spirit to bear up to the end. How, indeed, could we have carried on otherwise?

But one comforter was always to be found in every home, and this may have been the secret of our courage. This

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comforter was to be found near the poor as well as the rich, and it was one that never failed and never wearied.

But you must not imagine that it was anything solemn, or magnificent, such as the Bible, or peace of mind, or even happy love! Neither was it anything base or evil, such as drink or gambling! It was a perfectly harmless and everyday thing—in fact, it was nothing other than a fire which burned cheerily on the hearth on a winter's evening!

Dear me! how snug and homely it made the tiniest cottage; it would joke with the inhabitants for an entire evening! It crackled and hissed as if trying to laugh; it spat and fizzed as if imitating some cross or angry being. Sometimes nothing would persuade it to consume some old, gnarled log; it filled the whole room with smoke and damp, as if protesting that it had not enough to eat. Then, perhaps, it would burn away quickly and sink down into a glowing heap, just when work was in full swing, and folks must sit with folded

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hands in lap until it chose to burn up again.

It was most roguish, though, when the mistress of the household came with her three-legged cooking pot and tried to coax it to cook the dinner! Sometimes it would be good and docile and do its work well and quickly; but oftener it would flirt round and round—anywhere except under the pot! How it gladdened the eyes of the master when he came in wet and frozen out of the snow, filling him with a sense of warmth and comfort. How pleasant to think of the watching light, streaming out into the winter's night, a guiding star to the wanderer and a warning to the prowling fox or lynx.

But there were other things the fire could do, besides give light and warmth and cook the food. It awakened a thirst for pleasure in the soul of man. For what is man's soul but a flame? It flickers in and around the body of man as does the flame around the rough log.

Now, one winter's night, when the folk who sat round the fire had been silently

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gazing into the flames for a time, the fire began to speak to one and all, in their own language.

"Brother soul," it would say to one, "are you not a log, too? Why are you so sad and heavy?"

"Sister flame," would answer the human soul, "I have been chopping wood and minding the housework all day. I want nothing better than to sit still and watch you."

"I know," said the fire. "But, now it is evening, do as I do, shine and sparkle! Fun and warmth!"

And the souls obeyed the fire and began to play. They told stories, guessed riddles, they tuned the fiddles, and hung garlands on the tools and implements. Then they sang songs, played forfeits, and recalled old proverbs, thus thawing the ice out of their limbs, the peevishness out of their minds. They waked up and were merry, for the fire renewed in their hearts the wish to live out their humble and difficult lives.

One of the chief joys connected with

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the fire, however, was to sit round the hearth and tell stories of daring and adventure that pleased both young and old and seemed never to be exhausted, for, thank God, there have always been plenty of brave deeds to talk about.

The best-loved stories were those told about King Charles's days; he was a warrior among warriors, and there was wealth of legend about him and his men. Instead of disappearing with him into the grave, the tales lived on and were his best legacy. The most popular were, of course, those about the King himself; but next best were those about old General Löwensköld of Hedeby, whom many of them had seen and could describe from head to foot.

The General was so strong that he could bend iron as others broke chips. It was related how there dwelt a blacksmith at Smedsby in Svartsjö who made the best horseshoes in all the district. One day, the General rode to Smedsby and told Michael to shoe his horse. Soon Michael came out of the smithy with a

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finished shoe, and the General took it in his hand to test it. The shoe was strong and well made, but the General laughed out loud and said, "Do you call this iron?" whereupon he bent the shoe till it broke in half.

The smith grew nervous; he thought his work must be bad.

"There must have been a flaw in the iron," he said, and hurried into the smithy to get another shoe.

But the same thing happened again, only that this time the shoe was doubled up like a pair of scissors before it broke.

Then Michael grew alarmed. "You must either be King Charles himself, or else you are Strong Bengt from Hedeby."

"That wasn't such a bad guess, Michael," said the General, and then he paid the smith for shoeing his horse and for the two shoes he had broken.

Many and many were the stories told of the General, and there was not a man in the countryside who had not heard of him and who did not respect and admire him. They knew all about his ring, too,

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he was a Russian by birth; and, after all, people knew that Russians did not think it a sin to steal. Ivar had brought him back with him from Russia, where he found him in a prison. He was only three years old at that time, without father or mother, and had Ivar not rescued him, he would have starved to death there. He had been brought up honestly and uprightly, and had always been well behaved. Marit and he had grown up side by side, they had always loved each other, and it was hardly likely that a man with happiness and riches waiting for him in his future life would risk everything for the sake of a ring.

But, on the other hand, there was the General to be considered; the General, about whom they had heard so many legends, ever since their childhood; the General, whom they knew as well as their own father; he was so big and reliable—he who was dead and had been bereft of his dearest possession.

The General knew that Ingilbert Bardsson had taken the ring with him

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when he fled ; otherwise Ingilbert would have gone on his way in peace and would not have been killed. The General must also have known that the three Olsby men had taken the ring ; otherwise they would not have met the Captain in the forest or have been arrested and sent to prison.

It was very difficult to get at the truth in such a case ; but the people relied on the General almost more than on King Charles himself, and therefore the self-appointed courts of justice, sitting in the cottages, pronounced judgment.

Much astonishment, however, was aroused when they learned that the district judge of the real Court, which held its sittings in Broby Town Hall, had announced that, after the strictest examination, no proof of guilt could be found, nor could the accused be made to confess ; he therefore felt himself compelled to acquit them of murder and robbery. They were not, however, set at liberty, for the decision of the District Court had to be revised by the Court of

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Appeal, and this latter decided that the Olsby men were guilty and would be hanged.

This sentence could not be carried out at once, since the decision of the Court of Appeal must first be ratified by the King.

But when the King's decision was pronounced and made public, the church-goers willingly postponed their dinners in order to relate the wonderful news to their home-keeping brethren.

To put it shortly. The King had decided that it was quite evident that one of the three accused men must be guilty ; but that, as none of them would confess, the Judgment of God must decide between them. Therefore, at the next sitting of the Court, the three men were to cast lots in the presence of the judge, the jury, and the whole community. He who threw the lowest number would be considered guilty, and would be hanged for his crime ; the other two would immediately be set at liberty and allowed to return to their daily life.

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It was a wise decision and a just one. Everyone in Varmland was satisfied with it. Was it not splendid of the old King, who, instead of thinking himself wiser than everyone else, had appealed to the All-Knowing to decide. Now at last could they be certain that the truth would come to light.

There was certainly something very unusual in this trial. It was not a case of man against man, but a dead man was a party in the case—a dead man who desired to recover his own property. In any other case, one might have hesitated to resort to dice, but not in this. The General knew perfectly well who was withholding the ring ; and the best thing about the King's decision was that it would give the old dead General an opportunity to show his knowledge. It seemed almost as though King Charles wished to leave the decision to the General. He had probably known him in the old war days, and knew that he was to be relied on. Perhaps that was the idea—it was difficult to know.

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In any case, everyone was determined to be present at the meeting of the Court on the day when judgment was to be pronounced. Every person not too old to walk or too young to crawl set out for the Town Hall; for it was many years since anything so wonderful as this trial had taken place. No one was content to hear the news bit by bit—no! Each one must be present in person.

The farms lay at long distances apart, in many cases, and, as a rule, one might walk for miles without meeting a soul; but when all the inhabitants of the district had gathered together in one place, it was surprising how many there were. They stood closely packed in lines outside the Courthouse. They resembled a swarm of bees clinging to a beehive on a summer's day; they resembled the bees, also, in any other way, for they were not in their usual good humour. They were not silent and reverent, as when in church, nor cheerful and talkative, as when at market; they were excited and

irritable and possessed by hatred and revenge.

Can anyone wonder at it? They had imbibed a dread of malefactors with their mothers' milk; they had been rocked to sleep with cradle songs of wandering outlaws. They regarded all thieves and murderers as abominations and changelings, they no longer considered them human. They did not think it necessary to show them any pity. And now, to-day, one of these horrible creatures was to be brought to judgment, one of these bloodthirsty devils was to die, and they rejoiced at the thought; he would no longer have a chance of doing any harm!

The Ordeal, as was fitting, was to take place, not in the Courthouse, but in the open air. The crowd resented the fact that a cordon of soldiers was formed round the open space in front of the Town Hall, so that no one could get close to the prisoners; and many angry glances, you can believe, were cast at those soldiers for blocking their view.

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Ordinarily, such a procedure would have raised no resentment, but now everyone had grown daring and pushing.

The work-people had all received permission to leave home early, so as to get good places; they had, therefore, many dreary hours to wait, pressed as near to the cordon as they could get, and there was little to divert their attention. Once an official brought out a great drum and placed it in the centre of the open space; this pleased the crowd, for it showed that those inside the Courthouse proposed to start business before nightfall. Presently the official appeared again, this time carrying a table, a chair, an inkstand, and a pen, and, finally, he brought out the dice box, in which the dice rolled about. He then proceeded to throw the dice several times on to the drum, in order to test whether they were correct, whether they fell this way and that, as dice should.

This finished, he hurried back to the Courthouse again, and this was hardly to be wondered at, for each time he

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appeared the crowd shouted jests and sarcasms at him. They would never have behaved thus at other times, but to-day they had lost their wits.

The judge and the jurymen slipped through the cordon, having ridden, or walked, up to the Town Hall; and as soon as they appeared the crowd woke up and called out greetings and remarks in loud tones. Nothing could be done to prevent this; it was a big crowd, and in the worst of humours. The gentry present now began to slip inside the cordon; there was Löwensköld from Hedeby, the rector of Bro, the owner of the works at Ekeby, the naval Captain from Helgesäter, besides many others. These fresh arrivals were promptly informed of their good fortune in not having to stand in the crowd, fighting for places—with many more remarks of a like nature!

When there were no more left to jeer at, the crowd turned its attention to a young girl who stood pressed as close to the soldiers as possible. She was short

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and slight, and time after time the young men tried to force her back and take her place; but on seeing this, some of those standing near shouted that she was Marit, the daughter of Eric Ivarsson, and then she would be left in peace for a time.

Then it would begin again, but, instead of pushing her, they showered down insulting questions. She was asked which she would prefer to see hanged, her father or her betrothed. They wondered why she, the daughter of a thief, should have the best place.

People at home far away in the forest had wondered how she had had courage to stand where she was, but they knew, oh, yes, they knew very well. She was no timid girl, she had been present all through the examination of the accused and had neither spoken nor wept. She had nodded to the prisoners as if she expected them to be released the next day. Her presence had inspired them with fresh courage. They knew that there was one, at least, who believed in

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their innocence, who knew that no gold ring could tempt them to crime.

Beautiful, gentle, patient, she had sat the whole time in Court, disturbing nobody; indeed, she had made friends of the judge, the jury, and the sheriff. They would not absolutely assert it, but it was believed that the district judge would not have pronounced the accused innocent, had Marit not been in Court. It was impossible to believe that anyone beloved by her, could be guilty of crime.

Now here she stood, so that the prisoners might see her, might gain confidence and strength from her presence. She would pray that God's Will might be fulfilled in them, throughout the Ordeal.

It was difficult to know the truth; yet, they say that the apple never falls far from the tree, and she certainly looked good and innocent. Besides, she must surely have a loving heart, to be able to remain where she now stood.

She heard all the unkind things hurled at her, but she neither wept nor

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answered, nor did she try to escape. She knew that the unfortunate prisoners would be glad to see her. She was the only one, in that great crowd, who had a human heart to be touched by their sorrow.

She did not, however, stand there entirely in vain. Here and there was a man who had daughters of his own, equally innocent and sweet; and each one thought to himself, he would not wish a girl of his to stand where Marit stood now. And here and there a voice would be raised to defend her, or at least to try to silence the cruel, biting remarks thrown at her.

And so, at last, when the doors of the Town Hall were thrown open, and the Ordeal was about to commence, people rejoiced, not only because the long hours of waiting were ended, but also for Marit's sake. Walking in solemn procession, came first the constable, the sheriff, and the prisoners, the latter unfettered but with a soldier on either side. Next came the sexton, the rector, the

jurymen, the clerk, and the judge. Last of all followed the gentry and several farmers, whose position entitled them to a seat within the cordon.

The sheriff and the prisoners took up their position to the left of the Court-house, the judge and jury withdrew to the right, while the gentry were placed in the centre. The clerk seated himself at the table with his roll of papers. The great drum stood entirely alone in the centre of the open space, where everyone could see it.

As soon as the procession appeared, the people began to struggle and push; several big, strong youths tried to force their way into the first row, their object being to hustle Marit. But, terrified lest she should be prevented from seeing, she ducked down, and, being small and slim, managed to creep through the legs of the soldiers and get within the cordon. This was, however, contrary to all discipline, and the sheriff made a sign to the constable to remove her. The constable went up to Marit, and, putting his hand

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on her shoulder as though to arrest her, led her in the direction of the Court-house. But, as soon as they reached the thick crowd standing there, he let her go. He had seen enough of her to know that, if only she were allowed to stay in the vicinity of the prisoners, she would never think of trying to escape, and if, later, the sheriff wanted her, he would easily find her.

But who had time now to think of Marit? The rector and the sexton had stepped forward and taken up a position in the centre of the circle. They took off their hats, and the sexton started a hymn. As soon as the crowd heard this, they realised that something greater and more solemn than they had ever known was about to take place. An appeal was being made to the Almighty to make His Will known to them.

They grew even more serious when the rector began to speak. He prayed to Christ, the Son of God, beseeching Him who had Himself once stood at Pilate's judgment seat, to watch over the ac-

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eused, that they might not be wrongly judged. He prayed Him to guide the judge that he might not condemn an innocent man to death. Lastly, he prayed Him to protect the crowd, in order that they might not be witnesses to so great an injustice as had been the Jews on Golgotha.

The crowd listened with bowed heads as the rector prayed; their earthly thoughts fell away from them; their mood changed. It was as though God Himself had been called down into their very midst.

It was a lovely autumn day; the blue sky flecked with little white clouds, the trees covered with yellow leaves. The birds flew high above, starting for their winter quarters in the south; it was unusual to see such numbers as appeared that day. It surely betokened something strange. Could it be a sign from God that He approved of what was taking place?

As soon as the rector had finished, the judge stood forth and read the King's

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decree. It was long, with many turns of phrase that made it hard to follow. But they understood that the earthly power had laid aside its sword and sceptre, its wisdom and knowledge, for the nonce, and now desired to be guided by God. And they prayed, all and earnestly, that God would guide and help them.

Next, the sheriff took up the dice and begged the judge and several persons standing near to test them and see if they were true. The people listened, as they fell on to the parchment, with a strange shudder. Were those little objects, which had been the ruin of so many, now reckoned worthy to point out the Will of God?

When the dice had been tested, the prisoners were led forward, and the dice box handed to Eric Ivarsson, as being the eldest. The sheriff explained to him that this was not the final throw; it was only to decide which of the three should begin. The result was that Paul Eliasson threw the highest and Ivar Ivarsson the

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lowest. The latter, therefore, had to start.

The three accused men still wore the clothes in which they were arrested after meeting Captain Löwensköld in the forest, on their way home from their little farm, and they presented an untidy, worn appearance. Of the three, Ivar looked the least tired; having been a soldier, he was hardened by his sufferings and imprisonment during the wars. He held himself upright, and appeared courageous and unafeard.

As he stepped forward to the drum and received the dice box from the sheriff, the latter proceeded to show him what to do, but the old man replied, with a little smile :

“ It isn’t the first time, Mr Sheriff, that I have thrown the diee.” He spoke loudly so that the crowd could hear him.

“ Strong Bengt of Hedeby and I have often amused ourselves with them, on the long winter evenings away on the Steppes; but I never thought I should have to throw against him once more.”

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The sheriff tried to hurry him, but the people wanted to listen to him ; he was a brave man to be able to joke in such a position. He placed his hands together over the dice box, and they saw that he was praying, and when he had finished the Lord's Prayer, he said in a loud voice :

" Now I pray Thee, Lord Christ, Thou Who knowest my innocence, be gracious and let me throw low, for I have neither child nor lover to weep for me." So saying, he dashed the dice down on to the drum, so that they resounded.

At that moment, there was not a man in the crowd who did not wish that Ivar Ivarsson might go free. They knew now that he was brave and upright ; they wondered how they had ever supposed him to be a criminal.

It was unbearable to be so far away and unable to know what number was thrown. The judge and the sheriff bent eagerly forward, even the jury and the gentry went nearer to see the cast. There was general astonishment. Many

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nodded to Ivar, some shook hands with him, but great numbers knew nothing. They grumbled and growled. Then the judge made a sign to the sheriff, who mounted the steps leading to the Court-house, so as to be better seen and heard.

"Ivar Ivarsson has thrown double sixes! The highest throw of all!"

They knew now that Ivar was acquitted. They were delighted; many shouted, "Good luck to you, Ivar Ivarsson!"

But then something happened which filled everyone with amazement. Paul Eliasson burst out in a wild hurrah, pulled off his woollen cap, and threw it into the air. It was so unexpected that his guards had not time to prevent him. Everyone wondered at him. It was true that Ivar had been like a father to him, but this was a question of his own life. Could he really be so glad that another man was acquitted?

Order was, however, quickly restored; the officials returned to their places on the right-hand side, the prisoners and

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their guard going, as before, to the left, the other spectators retiring toward the Courthouse, leaving the drum again exposed to view, in the centre of the ring.

It was now Eric Ivarsson's turn to undergo the Ordeal. People could scarcely recognise the broken, stumbling old man who now came forward. Could that possibly be Eric Ivarsson, he who had always been so steady and powerful? His sight was dim, and many persons thought that he seemed hardly conscious of what he was doing. But as he took the dice box into his hand he made an effort to straighten himself up and to say a few words.

"I thank God that my brother is acquitted," said he, "for though in this matter I am as innocent as he is, still he has always been the better man of us two. And now, I pray Our Lord Christ that He will give me a low throw, so that my daughter may marry the man she loves and live happily with him to her life's end."

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As is the case with so many old people, all Eric's vanished strength seemed now to be concentrated in his voice. What he said could be heard by everyone, and it waked strong feeling. It was so unlike him to admit that anyone was better than himself and to wish for death in order to make another happy. No one could ever again think of him as a thief and a murderer. Tears came to the eyes of many standing around, and they prayed that God might send him a high throw. He barely shook the dice in the box, but just threw them out after moving it up and down once. His eyes were too dim for him to distinguish the black spots on the dice; indeed, he did not notice them, but stood staring out into the distance.

The judge and the others hurried forward. The same look of astonishment came over their faces as on the former occasion. The crowd seemed to understand what had happened, before the sheriff had had time to make his announcement, for a woman cried in a high

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voice : " God bless you, Eric Ivarsson ! " and a man's voice added quickly : " God be blessed and praised for helping you, Ivarsson ! "

Again Paul Eliasson's cap flew into the air, and again men wondered. Couldn't he understand what this second throw meant for himself ?

Eric stood listless and indifferent ; there was no light in his eyes ; it seemed as though he were waiting for the sheriff to announce the result. But even after it was made known that he too, like his brother, had thrown double sixes, he remained unmoved. He made an effort to stagger back to his former place, but was so weak that the constable had to put his arm round him to support him.

Now came Paul Eliasson's turn to try his fortune at the drum, and every eye was turned toward him. They had now made up their minds that he alone could be the culprit, and his doom was a fore-gone conclusion, for there was no higher throw than double sixes.

They were not displeased, so far, with

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the result, but now they saw that Marit Ivarsson had crept close to Paul. He did not hold her in his arms, nor did any kiss or caress pass between them; she only stood close pressed to him, and he put his arm about her waist. No one knew how long they had stood thus together, for every eye had been riveted on the drum.

There, at all events, they stood now, pressed close together in an inscrutable manner, in spite of the guard, in spite of the menacing authorities and the crowd of spectators, in spite, above all, of the frightful game of life and death in which they were involved. It was love—a more than earthly love—which united them. Thus they might have stood at the garden gate on an early summer's morning, after having danced the whole night together and first agreed to take each other for man and wife. Thus might they have stood after their First Communion, with souls free from all taint of sin. And assuredly thus might they have stood when, the horror

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of death behind them, they had met to part no more, for all eternity.

She stood gazing at him with ineffable love, and there was something in their souls that made the people sorry for Paul. He was like a young tree that would never blossom and bear fruit; like a cornfield, to be trampled down before it had had a chance to yield its rich crop.

He took his arm gently from Marit's waist, and went with the sheriff toward the drum. There was no sign of anxiety about him as he took the dice box in his hand. He did not pray, as had the others, but turning toward Marit he said:

"Don't be afraid! God knows I am as innocent as the others are." Thereupon he shook the dice playfully and sent them spinning round the drum as they fell.

He stood eagerly watching them, as they rolled, but when, at last, they stopped there was no need to wait for the sheriff to announce the number.

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Paul Eliasson himself cried out in a loud voice :

“ I have thrown double sixes, Marit ! I have thrown double sixes, like the others ! ”

It never occurred to him that he would not be acquitted at once, and he could hardly stand still for joy. He jumped, he threw his cap into the air, he even seized the soldier who guarded him in his arms and kissed him !

“ That shows he is a Russian,” thought the people, “ had he been a Swede, he would never have rejoiced so soon ! ”

The judge, the sheriff, the jurymen, and the gentry all went quietly and leisurely to the drum and looked at the dice. But there was no look of joy this time ; they shook their heads, and no one congratulated Paul Eliasson on his throw.

For the third time the sheriff stood on the steps and announced :

“ Paul Eliasson has thrown double sixes, which is the highest throw ! ”

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Then arose a great commotion among the crowd, but no rejoicing. No one believed that there had been any fraud about the matter—that was impossible—but everyone was uneasy, for the judgment of God had not been clearly made manifest.

Were all the three prisoners equally innocent, or were they all equally guilty? Captain Löwensköld was seen to hurry excitedly toward the judge. He was trying to explain that nothing had been decided; but the judge turned brusquely away from him.

The judge and the jury retired within the Courthouse, to deliberate over the matter, and while they were absent there was not a movement in the crowd—scarcely even a whisper. Paul Eliasson stood perfectly still. He seemed to understand that the decision might be interpreted in more ways than one.

After a short deliberation, the officials returned, and the judge announced that the District Court felt bound to interpret the decision to mean that all three men

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should be acquitted. Once again Paul Eliasson shook himself free of his guard and cast his cap high into the air, with a great cheer. But his joy was premature, for the judge continued :

“ The decision of the District Court must, however, be referred to the King by means of a courier, who will start for Stockholm to-day; the accused will, therefore, remain in custody until His Majesty’s confirmation of the District Court’s decision arrives.”

VIII

ON a fine autumn day, thirty years after the wonderful ordeal by dice that took place in front of the Court-house at Bro, Marit, daughter of Eric Ivarsson, sat on the steps outside the cottage, on the Big Farm at Olsby, where she lived. She was knitting a child's glove. She wanted to knit the gloves in a specially pretty pattern of diamonds and stripes, in order to please the child for whom she intended them, but she could not recall the pattern.

After sitting for a few minutes, trying patterns on the steps with the point of her knitting needle, she rose, went into the cottage, and opened a clothes chest to hunt for a good pattern. Near the bottom of the chest she came upon a woollen cap, artistically knitted in rows of various widths, and a good border; after hesitating for a few moments, she

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took it with her and went out again on to the steps.

While twisting it this way and that in her hand to study the pattern, Marit noticed that the moths had eaten little holes here and there in the cap. "Dear God," she said to herself, "it is hardly to be wondered at. For it is thirty years at least since it was in daily use. It is fortunate that I saw it in the chest that I may do something with it."

The cap was ornamented with a fine big tassel made of many colours, and here the moths seemed to have enjoyed themselves most for, as Marit shook the cap, they flew out in every direction, and finally the tassel itself fell off into her lap.

She took it up to see whether there was an end of wool left by which she could sew it on to the cap again, and, as she looked, she fancied she saw something bright shining amid the strands. Hastily parting them, she found a great gold signet ring with a red stone in the centre, firmly sewn with coarse linen

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thread into the very middle of the tassel.

Tassel and ring fell from her hands! She had never seen the ring, but there was no need for her to stare at the royal signature on the stone, or to read the inscription on the inner side, for her to recognise it and to guess to whom it had belonged. She leaned against the railing, and, shutting her eyes, sat back, white and still as a dying woman. She felt her heart must break.

For the sake of that ring her father Eric, her uncle Ivar, her betrothed Paul, had yielded up their lives, and now she had found it here, sewn into Paul's woollen cap!

How had it come there? When had it come there? Had Paul known it was there? Never! she said immediately. It was impossible that he could have known it. She remembered how joyfully he had thrown this very cap into the air the day that he and the old Ivarssons had been acquitted.

It all came back to her as if it had

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happened yesterday! Again she saw the crowd, who had at first been so spiteful and unfriendly to her and her dearest ones, but who, later, had come to believe in their innocence. She recalled the lovely blue sky, the migrating birds flying round and round and hovering over the Courthouse. Paul had seen them, too, and as she leaned against him he had whispered that soon his soul would be flying up into the heights like a poor little lost bird. And he had asked whether he should come back to her and dwell under the eaves at Olsby.

Impossible that Paul could have known that that cap, which he threw so joyfully up into the lovely autumn sky, could contain a stolen thing.

Then there came another day. Her heart shrank within her whenever she remembered it, but now she must think of it. Message had come from Stockholm saying that God's judgment was to be interpreted to mean that the three men were equally guilty, and were, therefore, to be hanged.

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She herself had been present when the sentence was carried out, so that the men whom she loved should know that there was at least one human being who believed in them, and grieved for them. But there was no longer then any need for her to have gone to the gallows. The people had all lately changed their point of view. The crowd standing outside the Courthouse even had been good to her; they had argued and debated among themselves, and they had come to the conclusion that the judgment ought to have been interpreted to mean that the three men were all innocent. The old General had allowed them each to have the highest throw—surely that could mean nothing but that none of them had taken the ring.

There had been universal lamentation when the three men were brought out. Women cried, the men stood with clenched fists and set teeth. They said that the parish of Bro would be destroyed as the city of Jerusalem had been, for putting innocent men to death.

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The crowd called out comforting words to the doomed men, and threatened the hangmen. Many curses were called down on Captain Löwensköld ; they said that he was in Stockholm at the time, and that it was his fault that the judgment had been interpreted to the detriment of the accused.

However that may have been, it was a fact that all the people shared her belief and confidence ; and that knowledge had helped her over that day—indeed, not only that day, but even up to the present time. Had the people among whom she lived considered her to be the daughter of a murderer, she could never have borne to go on living.

Paul Eliasson was the first to ascend the small platform under the gallows. He fell on his knees and prayed to God, he then turned to the priest, who stood beside him, and said something to him. Marit noticed that the priest immediately removed the woollen cap from Paul's head. When all was over he gave the cap to Marit with a message from

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Paul, saying that he sent it to her as a sign that she was in his thoughts during his last hour on earth.

Was it possible to believe that Paul would ever have done that had he known that the ring was hidden in the cap? Never! If there was one thing absolutely certain in this world, it was that Paul had no idea that the ring that had been on the finger of the dead man was hidden in the cap.

Marit suddenly bent down, and, holding the cap close to her eyes, studied it attentively. "Where can Paul have got that from?" she thought. "He was rather fond of finery, and never liked us to weave him grey clothes; he always wanted a colour in the frieze. He liked red cap with a big tassel. He must have been very fond of this one." . . .

she put the cap down, and leant back again against the railings, her mind going back into the past.

that remembered being in the foreststroye that Ingilbert had been scared to death. She saw how Paul, to-

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gether with her father and her uncle, had stooped over the body. The two elder men had settled that Ingilbert must be carried down to the village, and had gone to cut branches to make a bier. Paul had remained a moment to look at Ingilbert's cap, and had been so seized with a longing to possess it—for it was knitted in red, white, and blue wool in many patterns—that, unpereeived by anyone, he had exchanged it for his own cap. He had meant no harm; probably he had intended to keep it only a little while. His own was quite as good a cap as Ingilbert's, only not composed of so many colours or so well knitted.

Ingilbert had sewed the ring into his cap before leaving his home; he probably expected to be pursued, and had thus tried to conceal it. Since his death, no one had ever thought of searching in his cap—Paul least of anyone.

She felt she could swear to it that that was what had happened, and yet one could never be entirely certain. She put the ring back in her chest, and, taking

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the cap in her hand, she went out to the byre to speak to the milkmaid.

"Come out into the sunshine, Martha," she called into the dark cow-house, "and help me with a pattern I can't make out."

When the girl appeared, she held the cap out toward her. "I know you are good at knitting, Martha," she said. "I want to work this edge, but I can't understand it. You look at it, you are more at home with this sort of thing than I am."

The milkmaid took the cap and glanced at it. She seemed surprised, and came out of the shadow of the byre to look at it more closely.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

"It has lain in my clothes chest for many years," said Marit. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I knitted this cap for my brother, Ingilbert, in the last summer of his life," said Martha. "I have never seen it since the morning he went away

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from home. How can it have come here?"

"It probably came off when he fell," said Marit. "Perhaps one of our farm hands found it in the forest and brought it here. But if it has such sad memories for you, perhaps you would rather not copy the pattern for me?"

"Leave it with me, you shall have the pattern to-morrow," said the girl.

She took the eap and went back to the eowhouse, but Marit had heard the tears in her voiee.

"No! You shan't do it if it hurts you," she said.

"Nothing that I can do for you, Marit, ever hurts me."

It was Marit herself who had remembered Martha, Bard's daughter, sitting alone in the forest after the death of her father and her brother, and she had asked her to eome and be the dairymaid at the Big Farm at Olsby. Martha had come, and had never failed to show her gratitude for being received back into the company of her fellow creatures again.

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Marit returned to the steps in front of her cottage and took up her knitting, but she was too restless to work, so she leaned her head against the railings and tried to think what ought to be her next move.

If anyone on the farm at Olsby had understood the life lived by women who have left everything in the world to dwell in the cloister, he would certainly have said that Marit was one of these women. Her face was sallow and without a wrinkle. It was almost impossible for a stranger to say whether she was old or young. She had a gentle, peaceful expression, as of one who had laid aside all desires for herself. She never appeared to be very happy nor, on the other hand, to be deeply grieved about anything.

After the heavy blow she had received in her youth, she knew that life for her was ended. She had inherited the Big Farm from her father, but she knew that it was her duty to marry in order to carry on the farm and give it a master.

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To escape this, she had made over the whole property to one of her cousins, without any payment, on condition that she should have a cottage on the farm, and a pension for life.

She had been content and had never regretted her action. There was no chance for time to hang heavy on her hands for lack of work. Everyone relied on her wisdom and goodness; as soon as there was illness she was sent for; the children loved her—her cottage was constantly filled with young things—for they knew she always had time to adjust their little troubles.

As Marit sat wondering what she ought to do about the ring, a great wrath rose suddenly in her heart. She thought how easily it might have been found, how easily the old General might have arranged for its discovery; she understood now that he must have known where it was the whole time. Why had he not made them search Ingilbert's cap? Instead of this, he had allowed three innocent men to die on account of

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the ring. He had had power to allow that, but not to bring the ring out into the light of day.

At first, Marit thought she would go to the rector, tell him the whole story, and give him the ring; but finally she decided not to do so. Whercver she appeared, in church or at a party, she was always treated with respect; the contempt usually felt for the children of criminals had never attached to her. The people were firmly convinced that a great injustice had been done to her, and they wished to atone for it. The gentry in the neighbourhood also would go to meet her when they saw her leaving the church, and would exchange a few words with her. Even the family at Hedeby—not the Captain, it is true—but his wife and daughter-in-law, had made several attempts to approach Marit, but she had always evaded them. Since the trial, she had never spoken a word to anyone from Hedeby.

Was she to come forward now and confess that the Hedeby folk had been

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right? The ring had been found in the possession of the men of Olsby. Perhaps people would say that they had known where it was, and that they had borne imprisonment and examination in hopes of being acquitted, and of so having a chance to sell the ring.

In any case, Marit realised that it would be regarded as a justification of Captain Löwensköld—and even of his father—if she were to show the ring now and say where it had been found—and Marit was determined that she would do nothing advantageous or good for the Löwenskölds.

The Captain was now eighty years old, rich and powerful, honoured and respected. The King had made him a Baron; no misfortune had ever touched him; he had sons who also were rich and well married. And this was the man who had bereft Marit of everything—everything—everything. She lived alone, without possessions, without husband, without children, entirely through his fault. She had expected, all through

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the long years, that punishment would strike him, but nothing had ever happened.

Marit woke out of her deep meditation. She had heard the sound of little feet running toward her, and she knew that she was wanted. She saw two boys—one of ten, the other of eleven—approaching. One was Nils, the son of her cousin; the other, she did not know; they had probably come to ask her to help them.

"Marit," said Nils, "this is Adrian, from Hedeby; we were rolling our hoops on the road when we quarrelled and I tore Adrian's cap."

Marit looked at Adrian, a handsome boy with a gentle, friendly expression. Her heart began to beat—she always felt hurt and frightened when she saw a Löwensköld.

"We have made friends again," said Nils, "and now I want you to mend Adrian's cap for him before he goes home."

"Yes," said Marit. "I will mend it."

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She took the torn cap and went into the cottage.

"This must be a sign from God," she murmured. "Play out there for a little," she called out to the boys. "It will soon be ready."

She closed the door of her cottage and sat alone inside while she mended Adrian Löwensköld's woollen cap.

IX

SEVERAL more years had passed since the ring had last been heard of. Now it happened that Miss Malvina Spaak, in the year 1788, went to Hedeby as lady-housekeeper to the Löwenskölds. She was the daughter of a poor clergyman in Södermanland, who had never before set foot over the border into Varmland. She had, therefore, no idea of the customs of the house where she was going to work.

On the day of her arrival at Hedeby, Baroness Löwensköld sent for her and gave her a remarkable proof of her confidence in her.

"I think it is only fair," said the lady, "that I should tell you at once that we have reason to believe that Hedeby is haunted. It is not unusual for us to meet on the stairs, in the passages—sometimes even in the rooms—a tall, strong man, dressed in long jack boots and a blue

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uniform resembling that of a Carolinian. He will appear suddenly in front of you, if you come out of a room or stop on the stairs ; and, before you can detain him, he disappears. He does no harm—in fact, we think he likes us—but I must beg you, Miss Spaak, not to be frightened if you meet him.”

Malvina Spaak was only twenty-one, slim and neat, yet extraordinarily clever at all kinds of household and domestic matters ; she was also active and industrious, so that, wherever she went, the house was run with the regularity of clockwork. But she was terrified of ghosts, and had she known beforehand that Hedeby was haunted she would never have taken the situation. But now she was here, and beggars cannot afford to be choosers ! She therefore thanked the Baroness for her warning, with a little bow, and said she did not intend to let herself be frightened.

“ We have no idea why he haunts us,” continued the Baroness. “ My daughters think he resembles my husband’s grand-

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father, old General Löwensköld, whose picture you can see over there; they always refer to him as the old General. You can understand, however, that does not mean that the old man himself—who was really an excellent person—walks here. So, if the servants come to you with any foolish tales, I am sure you will be wise enough not to listen to them."

Again Miss Spaak bowed slightly and assured her employer that she never listened to servants' gossip about their masters and mistresses, and so the audience ended.

The girl was by no means an ordinary housekeeper, for she came of gentlefolk, and, consequently, she took her meals with the family, as did also the house steward and the girls' governess. As she was a spick and span little figure, with fair hair and blooming cheeks, she made a pleasing addition to the family board. Everyone found her obliging and pleasant, and useful in many ways, so she soon became very popular.

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It did not take her long to discover that the ghost spoken of by the Baroness was an ordinary topic of conversation at the dinner table. Either the governess or one of the young people was sure to remark, "I saw the General to-day," as though it were something to boast of. Hardly a day passed that she was not asked whether she had seen a ghost, but she had always to reply that she had not; and her answer seemed to cause a certain misgiving. It seemed to make her inferior to the steward and the governess, who had both frequently seen the General.

Malvina Spaak had never before come in contact with so jaunty a manner of treating a ghost, and from the very first she determined to try and conquer her terror. She told herself that if it was really a being from the other world who appeared, he must be unhappy and in need of help from the living, to enable him to rest in peace in his grave. She was one of those resolute characters who felt that, had she the power, she would

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make serious investigation and get to the bottom of the matter ; she would not allow it to become a subject of conversation at meals.

But she recognised her own position and would never allow a word of blame to pass her lips concerning the behaviour of her employers ; and she herself was careful never to joke on the subject of the ghost, but kept her own forebodings to herself.

Malvina had been a whole month at Hedeby before she saw the ghost. One forenoon she had been up to the attic to count the laundry ; while on the stairs, she met an unknown man, who drew aside quickly to let her pass. It was bright daylight, and she was not thinking about ghosts, so she only wondered what a strange man could be doing up near the attics, and turned to ask him his business. There was no one there. She ran upstairs quickly, went into the attic, searched every dark corner in the box room—quite prepared to take the thief by the scruff of the neck. But at

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last, when no human being appeared, she suddenly realised what it must have been.

"What an idiot I am!" she exclaimed. "Of course, that could be no one but the General!"

Yes, of course! The man was dressed in the very same blue coat and enormous jack boots that the General wore in his portrait. She could not quite recognise the face, for there was a grey, misty appearance over the features.

She stood for some time in the attic trying to recover herself. Her teeth chattered and her knees shook under her. Had there been no dinner to think of, she would never have got down those stairs again. She determined, however, to keep what she had seen to herself, and not to let the others joke about it.

Meanwhile, she could not get the General out of her thoughts, and she must have looked unlike her usual self, for as soon as she sat down to dinner, the

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son of the house, a youth of about nineteen, home from Upsala for Christmas, turned toward her.

"You have seen the General to-day, Miss Spaak," he said.

She could not deny this abrupt announcement, and immediately found herself the most important person present. Unfortunately, she could not deny, either, that she had been a little frightened, and that made them very merry! Frightened of the General! Surely nobody could possibly be frightened of him!

Malvina had often remarked that neither the Baron nor his wife ever joked about the General themselves, though they did not restrain the others from doing so. She now noticed that their son took the matter far more seriously than the others did.

"Personally," he said, "I envy all you people who see the General. I want to help him, but he never appears to me."

He spoke feelingly and in so kind a

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tone that Malvina prayed in her heart to God that his wish might soon be fulfilled. The young Baron would certainly be merciful to the poor ghost, and would send him to rest eternally in his grave.

During the next few days, the ghost seemed to turn his attention more particularly to Miss Spaak than to any of the others. She saw him so often as almost to become accustomed to him. He would appear on the stairs, in the passages, or in some dark corner of the kitchen.

No reason could ever be discovered for these appearances. Malvina sometimes wondered whether the General might possibly be searching for something in the house; but as he vanished the moment he met the glance of a human eye, it was impossible to gain any clear idea of his intention.

Miss Spaak noticed, in confirmation of what the Baroness told her, that the young people were firmly persuaded that it was the General who haunted Hedeby.

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the spinning wheel and the embroidery frames were put into another room, not so much as an end of cotton was left on the floor.

One night Miss Spaak, who slept in a chamber near the dining-room, was awakened by a loud thump on the wall near her bed, which caused her to roll out on to the floor. She had scarcely picked herself up before a fresh bang was heard, and again she rolled out. The same thing happened twice more.

“Good gracious! What is he doing in there?” she groaned, for she knew whence the noise proceeded. It was certainly not a pleasant neighbourhood. She lay the whole night sweating with terror lest the General should come in and give her a ghostly embrace.

Next morning, taking both the cook and the housemaid with her, she went into the dining-room to see what had happened. Nothing was disturbed, everything was tidy, except that four apples lay in the centre of the floor.

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Dear, dear ! They had sat eating apples in front of the fire the previous evening, and four apples had lain unperceived on the mantelshelf. But this had not pleased the General ! Miss Spaak had had to pay for her carelessness with a sleepless night !

On the other hand, she had had a true proof of friendship to place to his credit.

There had been festivity at Hedeby—a big dinner party and many visitors. Malvina had been up to her eyes in work : joints on every spit, puff pastry and pies in the oven, soup kettles and saucepans on the fire and on the hearth. But this was not all. She had to see to the arrangement of the dining-room table, to receive the silver from the Baroness, who herself counted it over with her. There had been the beer and wine to be got up from the cellar, and the candles to be put into the chandeliers. When you consider that the kitchen at Hedeby was situated in a distant wing of the building, so that you had

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to cross the yard to reach it, and that, on these great occasions, the house was full of strange and inexperienced servants, you can understand that it needed a capable person at the head of affairs.

But all went well and as it should. No thumb marks on the tumblers, no soggy lumps in the pastry; the beer had frothed high, and the soup was flavoured to a turn, and, needless to say, the coffee was perfect. Miss Spaak had risen to the occasion, displaying her true worth, and the Baroness herself had complimented her, saying that nothing could have been better.

But there came a terrible reverse! When the moment arrived for handing the silver back to the Baroness, two spoons—one teaspoon and one tablespoon—were missing!

There was an uproar! In those days there could be no greater upset in a house than for any of the silver to be lost. There were fever and unrest at Hedeby. People did nothing but search and

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search ; they remembered that an old beggar woman had been in the kitchen on the very day of the party, and they were prepared to go right away up to Finmark to catch her. People grew suspicious and unreasonable. The mistress mistrusted the housekeeper, the housekeeper mistrusted the servants, the servants mistrusted each other and all the rest of the world ! First one and then another appeared with eyes red from weeping, because she thought that the others thought that she had taken the spoons to bed with her !

This went on for days ; no spoons were found, and Miss Spaak was almost in despair. She had been to the pigsty and had hunted in the pigs' feeding trough to see if the spoons might have got there. She had crept up to the servants' clothes cupboard, and had surreptitiously searched in their little trunks, but all in vain, and she was completely at a loss where next to hunt. She could see that the Baroness, as well as the rest of the household, suspected her, for she was a

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stranger. She would be given notice to leave, she knew, unless she gave notice first herself.

She stood bending over the kitchen fire, weeping, so that her tears fell sizzling on to the hot iron of the grate, when she had a feeling that she must turn round. She did so, and there stood the General, by the kitchen wall, pointing to a shelf that was so high up and so inconveniently placed that nothing was ever kept on it.

As usual, the General vanished the instant she saw him, but Miss Spaak obeyed his gesture. She fetched the step-ladder from the pantry, placed it under the shelf, and, stretching up her hand, took hold of a dirty old dishcloth, in the middle of which lay the two silver spoons rolled up.

How had they come there? It must certainly have been done without the knowledge or consent of anyone. During the hurry and endless work of a big party, anything might happen. The cloth had been thrown aside because it

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was in the way, and the spoons had gone, too, without being noticed.

But now they were found, and Miss Spaak took them to the Baroness beaming with joy, and immediately became again everyone's helper and right hand.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. When young Baron Adrian came home in the spring, he heard how the General had shown Miss Spaak an unwonted favour, and forthwith he began to regard her in an entirely new light. As often as he could, he would go and talk to her in the dining-room or out in the kitchen. He would make the excuse that he wanted a new line for his fishing rod; sometimes he said it was the delicious smell of newly baked buns that attracted him. On these occasions he always brought the conversation round to the subject of the supernatural. He led her to talk of the ghosts in the big houses in Södermanland—such as Julita and Eriksberg—and asked her what she thought of them.

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But oftenest he wanted to talk about the General. He said he could not argue the matter with the others, for they only saw the amusing side of it. He himself felt only pity for the poor ghost, and wished to help him to rest. If only he could find out how it was to be done!

Miss Spaak said that, in her humble opinion, there was something in the house for which he was seeking.

The young Baron grew rather pale. He looked searchingly at the girl.

"*Ma foi!* That is an idea, Miss Spaak! But I can assure you that, if we possessed anything here, in Hedeby, which he wanted, we should not hesitate a moment to give it to him."

Malvina knew that he came after her simply and solely on account of the ghost, but all the same he was a charming young man, and so handsome! Yes, but she really meant that he was something more than handsome. He carried his head slightly bent forward; he had a thoughtful expression—indeed, many

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people thought him too serious. But that was only because they did not know him. Sometimes he would throw back his head and laugh, and play more roguish tricks than any of them. But whatever he did, there was an indescribable charm in his gestures, his voice, his smile.

On Sunday, Malvina had been to church and was walking home by a little short cut which ran through the rectory garden. Several members of the congregation were also walking along this path, when Malvina, being in a hurry, had to pass a woman who was going very slowly. Soon afterward, she came to a high and difficult stile. With her usual thoughtful consideration for others, she remembered the woman whom she had passed walking so slowly, and determined to stop and help her over the stile. When she put out her hand to help the woman, she noticed that she was not so old as she had thought her to be from the first glance. She was extraordinarily slight and pale, but the girl did not think she

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could be more than fifty. Apparently only a country woman, yet she had a certain dignity about her, as if she had undergone some experience that had raised her above her station.

After helping her over the stile, Malvina and she walked side by side along the narrow path.

"You are helping with the house-keeping at Hedeby, I think," said the woman.

"Yes, I am," said the girl.

"I wonder if you get on there?"

"Why should I not get on in so good a situation?" asked the girl, with a certain reserve.

"People say the place is haunted."

"We need not believe folks' gossip," said Malvina in a tone of reproof.

"No, certainly, we should not—I know—we should not," said the other.

They went on in silence for a little. She could see the woman knew something, and, as a matter of fact, she herself was burning with a desire to question her companion, but it was not right and

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fitting for her to do so. It was the woman who resumed the conversation.

"I think you look good," she said, "and I will therefore give you a piece of good advice. Do not stay too long at Hedeby, for he who walks there is not good to deal with. He never goes until he has got what he wants."

When the woman began to speak, Malvina determined to thank her haughtily for her warning; but her final words aroused her curiosity.

"What does he want? Do you know what he wants?"

"Have you no idea?" asked the woman. "Then I shall say no more. Perhaps it is best that you should not know."

Thereupon, giving her hand to Malvina, she stooped and, turning into another small path, soon disappeared out of sight.

At dinner, Malvina was careful not to refer to what had happened, but when Adrian joined her in the dairy, during the afternoon, she told him what the

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stranger had said to her. He was very much surprised.

"It must have been Marit Ivarsson from Olsby," he said. "Do you know, that is the first friendly word she has spoken to anyone from Hedeby for the last thirty years. Once she mended my woollen cap, which was torn by one of the Olsby boys, but she looked at me then as if she would have liked to tear out my eyes."

"But does she know what the General is looking for?"

"She knows better than anyone else, Miss Spaak, and I know too. My father has often told me the story, but my parents do not want my sisters to know it, for they might be frightened then; perhaps, we should not be able to continue living in this house. I ought not to tell you the story either."

"God forbid!" said Malvina. "If the Baron has forbidden . . ."

"It hurts me not to," said Adrian, "because I believe you could help me."

"Ah! How I wish I could!"

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"I repeat," said Adrian, "I want to help the poor ghost to rest. I am not afraid of him. I will follow him as soon as he calls me. Why should he show himself to everyone but me?"

X

ADRIAN LÖWENSKÖLD was lying asleep in a gable room at the top of the house, when he was awakened by a slight noise. He opened his eyes, and, as the shutters were not fastened up and it was a light summer night, he could plainly see the door open slowly. He thought it was the draught causing the movement until he caught sight of a dark form filling up the doorway and bending down as if searching for something inside the room.

Adrian plainly discerned an elderly man dressed in an old-fashioned cavalry uniform: a buff waistcoat of elks skin showed under his partially unbuttoned coat, the boots came above his knee, and he held up his long sword, as if to prevent its rattling.

"That is certainly the General," thought the young Baron. "What a

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good thing ! Now he shall see that I am not afraid of him ! ”

All the others who had seen the General maintained that he vanished as soon as they fixed their eyes on him ; but this did not happen now. The General remained standing in the doorway for some time after Adrian first saw him, and, after a few moments, when he had apparently satisfied himself that Adrian could endure his scrutiny, he held up one hand and signed to him.

Adrian immediately sat up in bed. “ Now or never ! ” thought he. “ At last he wants my help, and I shall go with him.”

He seemed to have been expecting this moment for years ; he had prepared himself for it, had tried to fortify his courage by thinking of it. He always knew he would have to undergo some ordeal. . . .

He would not keep the General waiting, but got straight out of bed and followed him just as he was, with only a sheet wrapped round him. For a

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moment, as he stood in the middle of the room, it occurred to him that it might be a dangerous experiment to trust himself to a being from the other world, and he recoiled from it. But he noticed that the General now stretched out both his hands toward him, as if in despairing supplication.

"What folly is this?" he thought.
"Am I frightened already, before I am even out of the room?"

He went toward the door; the General slipped out in front of him and went in the direction of the attics, walking backward, as if to make sure that the young man was following him. As Adrian was about to cross the threshold of his room, to follow the ghost toward the attics, a wave of fear again passed over him. Something told him to shut the door and hurry back to his bed. He began to discover that he had miscalculated his strength. He was not one of those who could pry into the secrets of the other world without danger to himself.

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Still his courage did not entirely fail him. He tried to reason with himself that the General certainly could not want to lead him into any danger. He only wanted to show him where the ring was. If he could only hold on for a few minutes more, he would accomplish that for which he had striven so long—he would send the tired wanderer back to his eternal rest.

The General was standing outside the room, waiting for him. It was darker there, but Adrian could yet see the dark form with the hands outstretched in supplication. Controlling himself, he stepped over the threshold, and the journey began again. The ghost turned toward the stairs, and when he saw that Adrian was following, he began to descend them. Still going backward, he seemed to stop on every step, as if to force the shrinking youth along by the power of his will.

It was a slow journey with many pauses, but continued relentlessly. Adrian tried to fortify himself with the

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thought of the many times he had boasted to his sisters that, whenever the General called, he would follow him. He also reminded himself how, from his very childhood, he had burned with a longing to investigate the unknown world and to get through to the other side. And now the great moment had arrived, now he was to follow a ghost out into the unknown. Was his wretched cowardice to prevent him from learning something at last?

Thus he forced himself to keep on, but he was careful not to approach too near the ghost. They walked about a couple of yards apart; when Adrian was half-way down the stairs the General had reached the bottom, and, as Adrian's foot touched the last step, the General stood in the hall.

But here Adrian stopped again. On his right, near the staircase, stood the door opening into his parents' bedroom, and he laid his fingers on the handle, not to turn it, but just to caress it lovingly. Imagine if his parents had known that

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he was just there, and in that company ! He longed to throw himself into his mother's arms. He felt that the moment he let go the handle of the door, he would be completely in the General's power.

While he stood, still holding the handle, he saw the front door burst open and the General about to step out over the threshold.

The light had been very dim, both in Adrian's room and on the staircase ; but now a bright light streamed through the open door, and, for the first time, the young Baron saw the General's features. It was the face of an old man—he recognised it at once from the portrait in the drawing-room. But there was none of the peacefulness of death there—a furious greed shone in the eyes, and on the lips trembled an uncanny smile of triumph and of certainty of victory.

To see these earthly passions depicted on a dead man's face was terrifying. We like to picture our dead friends at rest, far removed and free from human lusts

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and sufferings. We would have them removed from earthly desires, rejoicing only in heavenly things. Adrian could see nothing in this being, fast bound by earthly passions, but a seducer—an evil spirit, dragging him to his destruction.

He was overwhelmed with terror. In unreflecting anguish, he dashed open the door of his parents' room, and, stumbling over the threshold, cried out:

“Father! Mother! The General!” and fell on the floor in a dead swoon.

• • • • •

The pen drops from my fingers. Is it not bootless to try and write these things? This story was told me in the twilight sitting by the fire. I can still hear the compelling voice, I can feel the appropriate shiver running down my spine—that little tremor not so much of fear, as of expectation.

How breathlessly we listened to the story, for it seemed to lift a tiny corner of the veil hiding the unknown. What a strange sensation remained with us, as if a door had been opened, and now, at

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last, something would appear from out that great obscurity!

How much truth is there in it? Each narrator has inherited the story from his predecessor; one has added a little, another has taken away a little. But does it not contain, at least, a little germ of truth? Does it not give the impression of describing something that really happened?

'Who and what was the ghost that wandered about in Hedeby, who was seen in broad daylight, who interfered in household affairs, who found lost possessions? Who was he? What was he?

Was there not something unusually clear and solid in his appearance? Can he be distinguished by any special peculiarity, from other family ghosts? Does it not seem as though Miss Spaak might really have heard him throw apples at the dining-room wall, and that the young Baron Adrian might really have followed him out of his own room and down the stairs?

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Well, well ! Anyhow, perhaps some of those who even here and now can see the reality that lies behind the reality in which we now live, may be able to solve the riddle.

XI

YOUNG Baron Adrian lay in his parents' great bed, white and motionless. On laying a finger on his wrist, one could just feel the blood pulsing, but with difficulty. He had never regained consciousness after his deep swoon, but life was not extinct.

There was no doctor in the parish of Bro, but a servant had ridden at four o'clock that morning to Karlstad to fetch one. It was a very long ride, and even should the doctor be at home and willing to come so far, he could not be expected for at least twelve hours. One must even be prepared to wait a whole day or even two, if he was detained over a case.

Baroness Löwensköld sat beside the bed and never took her eyes from her son's face. She seemed to think that the faint glimmer of life could not fade so long as she sat watching and waiting.

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Occasionally, the Baron sat on the other side of the bed, but he could not keep still. He would take one of the limp hands between his own and feel the pulse, then he would go to the window and look out toward the road. Again he would take a little turn to consult the dining-room clock. He shook his head in answer to the eager questions that he could read in the anxious eyes of his daughters and their governess. And then he would return to the sick-room.

Except the parents, no one was allowed in that room except Malvina Spaak; neither the daughters nor the servants—only the housekeeper. She had just the right step, the gentle voice—she suited a sick-room.

Adrian's scream had waked Malvina in the middle of the night. On hearing the heavy fall, she had immediately jumped up and thrown on her clothes—she could never say how—but it was one of her unfailing maxims never to leave your room undressed, for then you could be of no possible use to anyone. She had

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met the Baroness coming from her room to call for help, and had helped the parents to get Adrian into bed. At first they thought he was dead, but Malvina noticed a frail movement of the pulse.

They used every effort to restore him, but the little spark of life was so frail, that it seemed to grow weaker in spite of all their efforts. After a time, they lost heart, and could do no more, but only sit and wait.

The Baroness liked to have the girl in the room, for she was so calm and so convinced that Adrian would soon wake up. She allowed Malvina to arrange her hair and put on her shoes; and, though she had to move to put on her clothes, she allowed the girl to fasten the buttons, so that she need not take her eyes from her son's face.

Presently she fetched a cup of coffee, and persuaded the Baroness, with friendly solicitation, to drink a little; and though her mistress had the impression that the girl was with her the whole time, as a matter of fact, Malvina

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went back and forth to the kitchen to see that the meals were prepared as usual. She forgot nothing. Her face was deadly pale but she went on with her work; breakfast was on the table at the proper time, and the boys who drove the cattle to pasture found their lunch packed in their knapsacks as usual.

The maids in the kitchen wanted to know what had happened to the young Baron; she told them that all that was known was that he had burst into his parents' room, calling out something about the General, and had then fallen into a dead faint, from which it was impossible to rouse him.

"The General must certainly have appeared to him," said the cook.

"Isn't it funny he should be so unkind to his own people?" said the house-maid.

"Oh, he has lost patience with them. They do nothing but laugh at him. He wants his ring back."

"You don't suppose the ring is here in Hedeby," said the housemaid. "He

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would burn the house over our heads to get it, if it was here."

"It must be here in some corner," said the cook, "or else he wouldn't be wandering all over the place as he is."

That day Miss Spaak made an exception of her good rule of never listening to servants' tales about their employers.

"What is that you are saying about a ring?" she asked.

"Don't you know, Miss, that the General wanders about here looking for his signet ring?" The cook was delighted to be asked the question. She and the housemaid lost no time in telling Miss Spaak the complete history of the robbery of the ring from the grave, and all about the ordeal of the dice; and when they had finished their tale, not a shadow of doubt remained in her mind. The ring somehow must have got to Hedeby, and was hidden in the house.

Now she was overtaken by a great trembling, such as she had experienced during her first encounter with the General on the attic stairs. She had

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gone in fear of him, the whole time ; now she knew how cruel and merciless these ghosts could be. She saw one fact standing out clear and direct before her—unless the ring could be restored to the General, Baron Adrian would die.

Hardly had she reached this conclusion, however, before she knew precisely what she had to do, for she was a very resolute creature. If that horrible ring was really in Hedeby, it had got to be found.

She went back to the house and peeped into the sick-room, where there was no change... she then ran upstairs and made Adrian's bed, so that it might be ready in case he got ~~better~~ letter and could be carried up to it. She finally went to find the governess and the girls, who were sitting about frightened and unhappy and not able to settle to anything, and told them what she had just heard from the servants about the ring. She impressed on them how important it was to find it, and begged them to help her look for it. They grew interested at once, and under-

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took to search inside the house—in all the rooms and in the box attics.

Malvina herself undertook the kitchen department, so she started all the women servants on the search there.

"The General appears in the kitchen as well as in the rest of the house," she thought to herself. "Something tells me the ring is about here somewhere."

They hunted everywhere. They turned out everything in the pantry, the kitchen, the bakehouse, the brewery. They searched in the cracks in the walls and in the fireplaces; they emptied all the spice boxes—they even tried the rat holes!

In spite of all her preoccupation, Malvina never omitted to run across and peep into the sick-room, from time to time. On one of her visits she found the Baroness crying.

"He is worse," she said. "I think he is dying."

Malvina went up to Adrian, took his powerless hand in hers, and felt his pulse.

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"Not worse, Baroness, surely a little better?"

She succeeded in reassuring the poor lady, but was very doubtful herself. Think, if he should die before she found the ring!

In her anxiety, she forgot to be as careful as usual; and in laying Adrian's hand back upon the bed, she gave it a little caress. She was scarcely aware of her own gesture, but the Baroness noticed it.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she thought. "Poor child, is that what ails her? Perhaps I ought to tell her. . . . But if we are to lose him, it doesn't matter. The General is angry with him, and those who anger the General have got to die."

When Miss Spaak returned to the kitchen, she asked the servants whether there was anybody in the countryside who could be of use in this great trouble, or whether it was necessary to go on waiting till the doctor could come?

Yes, there was a woman called Marit Ivarsson, at Olsby, whom people always

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sent for when they were hurt. She could staunch the flow of blood and set bones ; she might even be able to wake Baron Adrian from his death sleep—but she would certainly never come to Hedeby.

While the housemaid was telling Malvina about Marit Ivarsson, the cook had got up on to the step-ladder and was feeling along the high shelf where the lost silver spoons had been found after the big dinner party.

“ Ah ! ” she called out. “ I have found something I’ve been looking for ever so long. Here it is ! Baron Adrian’s old woollen cap ! ”

The housekeeper was shocked ! What possible kind of method could there have been in the housekeeping at Hedeby before she came ? How could Baron Adrian’s old cap have got there ?

“ It isn’t so curious, after all,” said the cook. “ He had grown out of it, so he gave it to me to use as a dish cloth. I am glad I have come upon it again ! ”

Miss Spaak took the cap quickly out of her hand.

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"It is a shame to cut it up," she said.
"We can give it to some poor person."

Taking it with her, she went out into the yard, and began to beat the dust out of it. While thus employed, the Baroness came out toward her.

"We fear that Adrian is worse," she said.

"Is there no one about here who understands doctoring?" asked Malvina innocently. "The servants mentioned a woman named Marit Ivarsson."

The Baroness Löwensköld drew herself up stiffly.

"Of course, if it was a case of Adrian's life, I should not hesitate to send for my worst enemy. But it would be quite useless. Marit Ivarsson will never enter Hedeby."

Malvina dared not oppose her mistress after such a statement. She returned to her search for the ring; then she busied herself about the dinner and succeeded in persuading even the Baroness to eat something. But there was no sign of the ring, and Malvina repeated over and over

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again to herself: "We must find the ring. The General will let Adrian die if he doesn't get his ring back."

That afternoon she started off to Olsby. She went on her own responsibility, for the last time she had seen Adrian his pulse had grown slower and weaker, and she could no longer wait for the doctor from Karlstad. It was more than likely that this woman, Marit, would refuse, but Malvina would leave no stone unturned.

Marit was sitting in her usual place on the cottage steps when Miss Spaak arrived. She had no work in her hands, but sat leaning back with her eyes closed. She was not, however, asleep, and looked up as the other approached. She recognised her at once.

"Well?" she said. "So they have sent for me from Hedeby?"

"Have you heard of our great misfortune?" asked Malvina.

"Yes, I have heard of it," said Marit, "and I will not come."

The girl answered not a word. A great

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hopelessness fell upon her. Everything seemed to go against her, but this was surely the worst of all. She could see and hear that Marit was glad. She had been sitting there, on those steps, rejoicing at their misfortune, rejoicing that Adrian Löwensköld was dying.

Hitherto, the girl had succeeded in keeping up her courage; she had neither cried out nor wept when Adrian lay helpless on the floor that night. Her one thought had been to help him and the others. But Marit's cruel opposition broke down her strength at last, and she began to weep violently and uncontrollably. Stumbling forward, she leant her forehead against the grey stone wall, and sobbed and cried.

Marit leant forward a little and sat for some time gazing at the unhappy girl. "Ah, so that is what ails her," she said. But as Marit sat watching this young creature, weeping tears of love over her beloved, something happened in her own soul. She had heard, a few hours before, how the General had appeared to Adrian

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and had frightened him almost to death, and she had said that now, at last, her hour of revenge had come. She had waited for it so many years, and all in vain. Captain Löwensköld had gone down to his grave untouched by punishment. It was true that the General had haunted Hedeby ever since she had sent the ring there; but apparently he had pursued his own family with his usual cruelty.

But now that misfortune had come upon them, they immediately sent to her for help! Why did they not go rather to the dead upon the gallows?

It did her good to say, "I will not." That was her method of revenge. But when Marit saw that young girl weeping with her head pressed against the wall, a memory rose within her.

"I, too, have leant against a hard wall and have wept with no one to comfort me or support me."

Thinking thus, the full tide of her girlhood's love welled up in the woman's heart and filled her with its warmth. She

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sat amazed, and said to herself, "That was how I too felt then; that is what it means to love someone—so strong and sweet a feeling."

The sight of Paul Eliasson rose within her mind; she could see him as he used to look—young, bright and happy, and handsome. She could recall his look, his voice, his every gesture—her whole heart was filled with him.

She thought that she had loved him always, and so indeed she had; but now, alas, her feeling had cooled during the long years! But now, again, it rose and flooded her soul with light! Yet with her awakened love came the memory of her awful suffering, caused by the tragic death of her beloved.

Marit looked once more at Malvina Spaak, who still stood weeping by the wall; she understood now what the girl was suffering. Gradually, during the long years, her love had weakened, she had forgotten how the fire could burn. But now she remembered, and she determined she would never be the cause

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of suffering to another such as she herself had undergone. She rose from the steps and went to Malvina.

"Come," she said curtly, "I will go with you."

They walked back to Hedeby together. Marit uttered not a word during the journey. Malvina found, later, that she had been considering what means she should take to find the ring.

They entered the house together by the front door and went straight to the sick-room. There was no change. Adrian lay there white and beautiful but still as death, and the Baroness sat motionless beside him, watching. Only when Marit came up to the bed did she look up.

The moment she recognised the figure who stood gazing at her son, she sank on her knees in front of her and laid her cheek against the woman's skirt.

"Marit! Marit!" she said. "Forget all the harm the Löwenskölds have done you! Save him, Marit, oh, save him!"

The countrywoman drew back a little,

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but the distracted mother crept after her on her knees.

" You don't know how terrified I have been since the General began to haunt us here again. I have been fearing and expecting something the whole time. I knew he would turn his anger against us."

Marit stood still. She shut her eyes and seemed to be pondering deeply within herself. Miss Spaak was certain that it pleased her to hear the Baroness speak of her suffering.

" I wanted to go to you, Marit, and kneel at your feet, as I am doing now, and entreat you to forgive the Löwenskölds. But I dared not, I thought it would be impossible for you to pardon us."

" It is no use your asking me, Baroness Löwensköld. I cannot forgive."

" But yet you have come here?"

" I have come for the young lady's sake, because she begged me to do so."

Marit then went round to the other side of the bed. Laying her hand on the

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sick man's breast, she murmured some words, at the same time knitting her brows over her half-closed eyes and pursing her lips. She reminded the girl of a fortune teller.

"He will certainly live," said Marit, "but you must remember, my lady, that I am here entirely for the girl's sake."

"Yes, Marit," answered the Baroness. "I shall never forget it."

It seemed to Miss Spaak as though her mistress had intended to add something, but she broke off suddenly, biting her lip.

"And now you must let me arrange everything."

"You must do whatever you wish, Marit. The Baron is away—I begged him to ride and meet the doctor and ask him to hasten."

Miss Spaak had expected that Marit Ivarsson would take some steps to wake the young Baron from his stupor, but to her great surprise, she did nothing of the sort. She ordered that a collection should be made of all Baron Adrian's clothes—both those in use and those set

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aside as worn out. She wished to see everything that had ever touched his body, socks and shirts—even his woollen gloves and caps.

The entire day was spent in searching at Hedeby. Although Malvina sighed at the thought that Marit was nothing better than an ordinary “wise woman,” with the ordinary fortune teller’s tricks, yet she hastened to get together everything from cupboards, drawers, chests in the attics, that had been worn by the sick man. His sisters, who remembered what Adrian had been in the habit of wearing, helped her; and soon she had collected a whole bundle, which she took to Marit.

The latter proceeded to lay them out on the kitchen table and went carefully through each article. She laid an old pair of shoes on one side, together with some little woollen gloves and a shirt, while she murmured incessantly, in a low voice, “A pair for the feet, a pair for the hands, one for the body, one for the head.”

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Suddenly she said, in her ordinary voice, "I must have something for the head, I must have something that is warm and soft."

The housekeeper pointed to the hats and a helmet which she had found.

"No, it must be something warm and soft," said Marit. "Hadn't Baron Adrian any woollen cap like other boys?"

The girl was on the point of saying that she had not seen one when the cook forestalled her.

"I did find his old woollen cap on the shelf up there, this morning, but Miss Spaak took it from me."

Miss Spaak was therefore obliged to produce the cap, which she had intended never to part with, but to treasure as a loved memento for the rest of her life.

As soon as Marit took the cap in her hands, she began again to murmur her incantation; but now there was a different tone in her voice—the tone of a cat purring with satisfaction.

After turning and twisting the cap and

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murmuring over it for a long time, she said at last: "Now, nothing more is necessary. All these things must be laid in the General's grave."

But Malvina was perfectly astounded at these words.

"How do you suppose that the Baron will ever allow the grave to be opened to receive this old rubbish?" she asked.

Marit regarded her with a little smile; then, taking her by the hand, she led her toward a window, where they could stand with their back turned toward the others in the kitchen. There, holding Adrian's cap near to Malvina's eyes, she parted the strands of the woollen tassel. Neither of the women spoke a word, but the housekeeper's face was deathly white; and her hands shook as she turned back into the room.

Marit tied the clothes into a little bundle, and gave it to Miss Spaak.

"I have done my share," she said. "Now it is for others to do theirs and to see that these things are put into the grave."

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And with that she went out.

Soon after ten o'clock that same evening, Malvina Spaak walked up to the churchyard. She carried Marit's little bundle in her hand; otherwise, she had only gone for a random stroll. She had not the faintest idea how she was to get the things into the General's grave.

Baron Löwensköld had come riding in accompanied by the doctor soon after Marit had left; and Miss Spaak had hoped that Adrian would be restored to consciousness without her having to do anything further in the matter. But the doctor had immediately pronounced that he could do nothing. He said that the young man had but a few hours more to live.

Then, taking the bundle under her arm, the girl had started on her walk. She knew that there was no earthly possibility of persuading Baron Löwensköld to open the grave merely to lay Adrian's old garments in it. If she could tell him what the bundle really contained, she

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was certain that he would immediately return the ring to its rightful owner ; but then she would betray Marit Ivarsson, for she was convinced that Marit must, at some time, have conveyed the ring to Hedeby.

Adrian had told her that Marit had once mended his cap for him. No, she could not possibly let the Baron know the truth of the matter.

Later on, it occurred to Malvina to wonder why she had felt no fear that night ; but she simply stepped over the low wall of the churchyard and went straight to the Löwensköld's grave, without a thought of anything but getting the ring into the vault.

She sat down on the gravestone and joined her hands together in prayer. "If God does not help me," she thought, "the grave will be opened, not for the ring, but for one for whom I shall always grieve."

While praying, she noticed a slight movement in the grass clothing the mound on which the gravestone rested.

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A tiny head peeped out and disappeared the moment Malvina moved—she feared the rat as much as the rat feared her! The sight of the creature, however, gave her a swift inspiration. Running to a large lilac bush, she broke off a long dry branch. This she pushed down the rat hole. First, she tried pushing directly down, but immediately encountered an obstacle. Then she tried pushing it on the slant and succeeded in getting it in a good way toward the grave. She was surprised how far it penetrated—the whole twig disappeared—but she drew it out quickly and measured it with her arm. It was three feet long and had gone the whole length into the earth. It must have reached to the vault!

Malvina had never felt so clear-headed and collected in her whole life. She realised that the rats must have made a way into the vault—perhaps they had found a drain, or a brick might have crumbled away.

She lay down on the ground, dug up a sod, and, scattering the loose earth

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under it, inserted her arm. She encountered no obstacle, but did not touch the wall. Her arm was too short! She could not reach the vault!

Then, hastily untying the bundle, she took out the cap. Thrusting the branch through it, she tried slowly to push it into the hole, and soon it had disappeared. She continued to guide the branch, slowly and carefully, farther and farther in; then, suddenly, when almost the whole twig had disappeared in the ground, she felt it strongly jerked out of her hand. It fell into the hole and vanished.

It was possible that it had only fallen by its own weight, but she felt absolutely certain that it had been snatched from her.

Now, at last, she began to be frightened. Taking the contents of the bundle, she thrust them all into the hole; put back the sods and the earth as well as she could, and hurried away. She ran the whole distance back to Hedeby without stopping for a moment.

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When she reached home, the Baron and Baroness were standing together on the steps. They came eagerly down to meet her.

"Where have you been?" they asked.
"We have been waiting here for you."

"Is Baron Adrian dead?" she asked.

"No, he is not dead," said the Baron, "but tell us first where you have been."

Malvina was so breathless she could hardly speak; but she managed to tell them of the task put upon her by Marit, and of how she had managed to get at least one of the things into the vault by means of the rat hole.

"This is most extraordinary, Miss Spaak," said the Baron, "for Adrian is really better. He awakened up a little while ago, and his first words were: 'The General has got his ring now!'"

"His heart is beating quite normally," said the Baroness, "and he wants to speak to you. He says you are the person who has saved him."

They allowed Miss Spaak to go alone to see Adrian. As soon as he saw her,

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he sat up in bed and stretched out his arms toward her.

"I know it, I know it already!" he cried. "The General has got back his ring, and entirely through you!"

Malvina laughed and cried as she lay in his arms, and he kissed her on the forehead.

"I thank you for my life," he said. "Had it not been for you, I should now be a corpse. I can never be grateful enough to you."

The rapture with which Adrian greeted her had possibly caused poor Malvina to linger too long in his arms, for he hastened to add: "And not only I am grateful, but there is also another."

He showed her a locket, hanging on his breast. Miss Spaak could faintly distinguish the miniature of a young girl.

"You are the first person, besides my parents, who knows of this," he said. "When she comes to Hedeby in a few weeks' time, she will be able to thank you much better than I can."

The housekeeper, Miss Spaak, bowed

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to the young Baron Adrian Löwensköld and thanked him for his confidence. She longed to say that she did not intend to stay at Hedeby to meet his betrothed, but she remembered herself in time. And besides, beggars cannot be choosers !

THE END

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